Tied Knots

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Tied Knots

by arkastadt

Summary

One night Chuuya comes home and finds a drunk stranger in his bed. Getting the guy, who turns out to be an obnoxious, pitiful literature student, out of his apartment is one thing, but getting him out of his life? Practically impossible.
-
Or, the Port Mafia executive Chuuya and literature student Dazai AU.
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Now with stunning art by run_mello mementochuuya and Lorax_Min (Chuuya) (Dazai) <3

Notes

Hi! I started this story back in September on twitter, and thought that I could maybe finally start posting it here lol

The fic will deal with depression, suicidal behavior, and trauma quite often. I'll put specific warnings on the A/N before each chapter as well. The main and endgame ship is Dazai/Chuuya, but it's a slow-burn with lots of obstacles and angst. If you're uncomfortable with other pairings outside of SKK even though they're purely sexual and/or platonic and NOT romantic (in particular: Dazai/Oda, Chuuya/Fyodor/Yosano) then let this be your warning!

Listen to the playlist here!

Translation into Spanish available on Wattpad

Translation into Russian available on Ficbook

Warnings for this chapter:
- self harm scars

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Magyar available: Tied Knots by TheKija

Chapter 1: Fae, not Elves

The moment Chuuya enters his apartment, he knows something's off.

His security system didn't send him any notifications, but he's well aware that a capable thief could override it if they put their mind to it, no matter how expensive it was. It's not that. It's the way his doormat has shifted several inches to the right. Chuuya has by no means an eidetic memory, but noticing small details, especially ones that don't *fit,* is part of the job.

Of course, there are also the shoes that are a big giveaway. As far as he remembers, he didn't buy a new pair of doc martens, let alone throw them halfway across his hallway.

It's at this point that Chuuya wonders what kind of burglar is stupid enough to leave his shoes behind. And why the hell would they escape barefooted?

Several steps and a turn into his bedroom later, he discovers that the shoes weren't exactly left behind.

The thief...

Chuuya enters his room, and sure enough, there's an actual person in his bed. Sleeping. Snoring, even.

The thief is still here.

...

Throughout his seven years in the mafia, Chuuya has never encountered an adversary as bizarre as this: taking a nap in the middle of enemy territory.

He hesitates, though just for a moment of utter bewilderment, before jumping into action. Is this some sort of twisted strategy to catch him off guard? Chuuya takes one look at the intruder — male, late teens or very early twenties, bandages all over his body — and lets out a puzzled breath. No way in hell, is this is something serious to deal with. Right?

Only way to find out, he thinks. Even if the boy looks like a harmless kitten that wandered into the wrong home, Chuuya still wants a peaceful rest of the night after dealing with bothersome foreigners the

whole day. There's still blood under his nails. He needs a fucking shower, not *this*.

"Oi. You," he says, shaking the guy's shoulder. "Wake up!"

For a moment, nothing happens. Then the stranger lets out a low whine, his breath reeking like an alcohol dispenser, and buries his face in the sheets, hugging one of Chuuya's spare pillows to his chest.

Wow.

Chuuya lets out a sigh. This is mildly infuriating. He had plans for today. Cook something nice, catch up on the drama he's been watching and maybe jerk off. It's been a while, damn it. None of these plans included dealing with a stranger in his bed.

It's not like this is an actual issue. Chuuya's a damn mafia executive, for fuck's sake. One call, and the kid will find himself in one of their dungeons, spilling every last secret. Hell, Chuuya could make him beg to answer one of his questions himself in less than one minute, but… something tells him that if Chuuya were to throw him out in the middle of the night, this drunk and vulnerable, he wouldn't come out of it whole.

Of all people, Chuuya knows best what happens to unconscious people alone at night. A part of him that has remained steadfast despite all the bloody chapters in his life refuses to look away and let it happen to someone else.

So he grabs a chair and a book and sits down a few feet away. If the poor drunk so much as moves the wrong way, Chuuya will know.

In a way, he's thankful for this intrusion — aside from the plans that got ransacked — because he finally catches up on the book he's been reading for months now. Chuuya has just reached the final epic battle between the werewolves in the story when he feels the stranger stir with a slight groan. It takes a few seconds of yawning, stretching, and blinking before he ever so slowly opens his eyes. A pair of dark, wide doe eyes come to stare at him.

"This... isn't my dorm."

Chuuya snaps the book shut. "No shit."

"Where…" The kid trails off with a shake of his head before sitting up. "Who are you?"

"The owner of the apartment you broke into."

That takes a good moment to register before he scratches the back of his bandaged neck. "Heh. Funny."

"Not at all," Chuuya replies. "If this was anyone else, they could have shot you on sight. Or called the cops."

"Well, why didn't you?"

That's a good question. Aside from the fact that Chuuya's a freaking mafia executive and working with the authorities principally goes against every single of his principles, he has no reason for sparing this moron's life and waiting for him to wake up instead of tossing him out. Maybe Kouyou's right and he is too fond of strays. He has never been able to drive past a soggy, scrawny kitten on the road. He supposes this isn't any different, even if today's kitten happens to be a lanky kid with a shock of chocolate brown hair and a snoopy hoodie.

"I'm asking the questions here," Chuuya says, moving toward the bed. He cocks his head to the side. "Your name."

"... Dazai."

"Why'd you break into my flat, Dazai?"

"You see, I was at this bar where I had a drink, then another, and quite a few more, I guess. After that, I don't really remember much, so it's as much as a mystery to me as it is to you, chibi-san."

"Hah?"

"You're so small," Dazai says with a grin. "Like a chibi."

Chuuya hasn't been called *small* in ages. The people at the port mafia are too familiar with his skills and ability to ever utter the words small and Chuuya in the same sentence. And this brat right here….

"You really should be careful with your words."

"Or what? Chibi will pummel me?" Shrugging, Dazai wiggles out of bed and rises to his feet. Chuuya's scowls deepens into a glare when the kid ends up an entire head taller than him. "Who are you anyway?" Dazai eyes the room with too much curiosity. "You didn't call the cops, so there must be something wrong with you too."

"There's nothing wrong with me, you oversized brat —"

"Hmm, I beg to differ. Who in their right mind would let a stranger sleep in their bed? Are you a creep? Or are you just so lonely you're willing to host anyone that walks in here?"

Chuuya's knuckles itch to give him a good beating, but he didn't spend years working on his anger issues to lose his composure because of some kid with a big mouth. Dazai is nothing compared to the guys he has to deal with on the daily. This is child's play.

He takes a step towards Dazai, whipping out the dagger underneath his vest so fast that the pest has no time to react before he ends up pinned to the wall. "I was being considerate when I let you stay here," Chuuya says calmly, "but you're awake now and my kindness isn't limitless. So either you piss off or —"

"Or you're going to stab me with this knife?" Dazai asks. His eyes dance with something crazily close to marvel — a paradox of a reaction considering his breath hitches. "Ohhh, this is even more fun than I hoped it would be."

Than he hoped…?

"The fuck do you mean?" This wasn't an accident after all? He has no weapons on him though, and he doesn't seem to be from any of the enemy organizations that Chuuya's aware of. Who exactly is this guy?

"Don't hurt yourself trying to think so hard," Dazai says with a tsk. "Sometimes, when I'm bored, I drink a little and let the alcohol take me wherever it wants. Most of the time, I end up on the side of the street or in a trash can, but I think I finally got lucky!"

What a deranged worm of a human being. Chuuya scowls. "Don't you have friends who take you home when you're trashed?"

"Oh, I drink alone."

"Why would you do that?"

"Why does the sun only shine during the day? Why do we need air to breathe? Why does anyone do anything?" Dazai sings and edges forward until the blade of the knife brushes the gauze covering his neck. He meets Chuuya's hard stare with a raised brow.

Sighing, Chuuya swings the knife back into his pocket, watching the idiot smile with satisfaction and take another nosy look around his surroundings. Even if this frankly ridiculous and absurd story is made

up and Dazai turns out to be an enemy in disguise, after all, Chuuya will have no issue taking out this guy. Dazai might be foolishly fearless, and a touch masochistic, but he'll never defeat Chuuya in combat. He has yet to meet someone that can.

"So, what is your name, chibikko?"

He rolls his eyes. "That's none of your damn business."

"Well, I woke up in your bed, so I think I deserve to know, no?"

"No."

Dazai gives him a dramatic pout before walking — no, staggering over to his shelf on the other side of the room. He must still be drunk, though that doesn't deter him from shamelessly snooping around.

Jesus christ.

"Hey —"

"Ehhh, what's this? A court of thorns and roses?" Dazai asks, flipping the book open. "Isn't this the one where elves have sex all the t—"

"Gimme that—!" Chuuya rips the book out of his inquisitive fingers and puts it back on the shelf, leveling a glare at Dazai. "It's not elves, it's *faes*, and again, none of your fucking business."

"Raunchy."

"Yes, and?" Chuuya grabs a fistful of Dazai's collar and pushes him towards the door. "C'mon, let's go. You're overstaying your welcome —"

"Ah, but I'm still drunk," Dazai sputters, grabbing the doorframes. "You wouldn't let a poor drunk student walk home all on his own, would you?"

Chuuya fishes out his car keys from his pocket and lets them dangle between his fingers. "I'll drive you home."

"Oh, I must have forgotten to mention it. I'm homeless!"

"Stop fucking stalling," Chuuya snaps and goes for Dazai's pocket, successfully grabbing something that feels like a wallet, feeling his whole body go taut like like a violin.

"That's quite blunt for a first date! I don't even know your n—"

"Dazai Osamu," Chuuya reads aloud when he's put some distance between them, glad that his name, at least, wasn't a lie, "5 Chome-11-18 Hiyoshi, Kohoku Ward. Doesn't sound homeless to me."

"Rude!"

"Don't fucking care. I had a long day and need some sleep, so *move it."*

For the first time today, Dazai looks annoyed as he scrunches up his nose and lets out a little grumble. He finally moves, though, so that's something.

Chuuya steers him towards his door, making sure the idiot doesn't get to see much of the rest of his apartment. Dazai might be only a poor student, but if someone saw him come out of a mafia executive's flat, they will draw dangerous assumptions, and as annoying as he is, Chuuya doesn't want him to suffer unnecessary pain because he ended up at the wrong place because of a stupid drunken mistake.

In his hallway, Chuuya grabs one of his hats and unceremoniously drops it on Dazai's head.

"No, thanks." Dazai's hand flies up to it. "I'd rather not look ugly."

"It's cold outside," Chuuya lies, opening the door. "Thank me later."

Stepping out into the stairwell, Dazai gives him a look. "You know, Rhysand turns out to be Feyre's mate, and in the end, they defeat the king of hybern; Rhysand almost dies —"

Chuuya frowns at this stream of random information. Then it shifts into a laugh. "You idiot, I *read* the fucking books. You can't spoil me."

"Fine. It was worth a try," Dazai mutters.

They reach the car, but Dazai stays silent, not even uttering one word about Chuuya's car — which is a beauty. It's probably for the best anyway. Chuuya slides behind the wheel, turns the key, and delights in the purr that resonates through the silence.

Knowing Yokohama's streets in and out, it's neither a difficult nor a long ride to Dazai's place, the car flying past crowded nightclubs and neon city lights at every corner.

When Chuuya stops at a side curb, he feels Dazai's eyes finally turn to

him once again. He meets his stare. "I still don't know your name," Dazai says quietly.

He lets out a long sigh. "Chuuya." That's all he can give.

"Chuuya," Dazai repeats, tasting the letters on his tongue before nodding and slipping out of the car without another word. Chuuya expected another stupid comment about his height or maybe an insult, but he figures this strange exit is another one of his quirks; Dazai merely's full of surprises. After he makes sure Dazai safely disappears inside the building, he puts his car playlist on shuffle and pulls back into the street, heading straight home.

The next day of work drags. Not only did Chuuya go to bed three hours later than usual, messing up his whole schedule, but once he finally changed his sheets and slipped under the fresh blankets, sleep did not fucking come. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw that expression on Dazai's face, so adamant about not going back to his own flat. It was weird. Well, the whole experience was, but Chuuya works in the mafia, so he's pretty familiar with unusual things. There was just something very... off with that guy.

Dazai, a faint voice in his head whispers. His name is Dazai.

So he arrives at the headquarters with three cups of coffee keeping him standing, heading straight for his office, but *of course,* Kajii intercepts him and loudly talks about what he was up to last night, ignoring the fact that Chuuya doesn't fucking care. The paperwork keeps him busy for a while, but eventually, his mind starts wandering off again, returning to those copper-red eyes over and over. He has a meeting in the fight ring Port Mafia owns later that night, keeping up appearances and talking numbers. Then he promptly gets summoned to take care of a situation at the docks that takes way more time than it should.

So when he finally opens the door to his apartment, he's looking forward to a big glass of wine, maybe ordering some take-out and reading, except —

Except his security system is clearly shut off.

Chuuya stills in the darkness of his hallway and lets the door fall shut behind him. Getting broken in two days in a row? That can't be a coincidence. Slowly he passes the corridor and comes to a halt in his living room, staring at the couch.

"Chuuya."

"Dazai?" he asks. "What are you doing here?" Again?

Grinning sweetly, Dazai lifts his hand, showing him a pair of reading glasses. "I accidentally left those here yesterday. Oopsie. So naturally, I had to get them!"

"Naturally," Chuuya echoes, too tired to even be upset about this. "Doesn't explain why you stayed here waiting for me, though."

"Oh, that. You see, I have this theory —"

"Hang on, I need wine for this," Chuuya cuts in and pours himself a glass on the other side of the room while Dazai remains on the couch, sitting there like it's something he does every day. "What fucking theory did you come up with then? I'm all ears."

"Well," Dazai starts, "first off, something I already mentioned. Every sane person would immediately call the authorities if they encountered a stranger in their bed, yes? You're neither creepy nor lonely from what I've seen — though the smutty books say something different. You're quite handsome and confident, too, so I doubt you have much trouble getting people into your bed. That either means you don't like the authorities, which — fair enough: neither do I. Or you have something to hide. That brings us to the next point: you had a knife. And it wasn't only a prop. You knew how to use it."

"Many people know how to use a fucking knife," Chuuya huffs. "What's your damn point?"

"My point is that you came home pretty late on top of that. You weren't intoxicated. In fact, you wore business attire like you came from *work*. In the middle of the night. You wore a coat, dark clothes, and even a hat!"

Chuuya narrows his eyes.

"You also seem to be well-off. A wine collection. A penthouse in the middle of the city all for yourself. Fancy car..."

The hand around the wine glass clenches ever so slightly.

"... oh, and one other thing," Dazai says nonchalantly, shrugging. "Your name. Chuuya Nakahara, right? The mafioso."

"Who are you?"

"Dazai Osamu."

"Yes, I got that. Who do you work for?"

"Fukuzawa. Owner of a coffee shop, a few blocks away from my dorm." He winks. "Our pastries are to die for. You should come by and try them someday."

Chuuya ran a background check on him just earlier today. Dazai's telling the truth. But it might be a disguise. And only people involved in the underworld would recognize Chuuya's name, let alone know of his fucking ability.

Dazai has to be something more.

"I'm smart," Dazai provides. "That's all there is to know, Chuuya."

Taking a big gulp of his glass, Chuuya lets his next course of action run through his head. Maybe Dazai's, in fact, just smart, but that doesn't make it any less dangerous for him to be here and construct such ridiculously correct theories. Then again, keeping him close might be safer, too... for both of them.

"You shouldn't say such stupid things in public," Chuuya finally replies, not denying or confirming anything. Granted, Port Mafia has been out in public more often in the last few years, but that doesn't mean it's okay to talk about it to strangers. It's an organization that's supposed to operate in the shadows. They don't walk among civilians in the daylight.

"Eh, I just told you. I'm smart," Dazai says with an exasperated expression on his face. "We're not in public. We're in an apartment that's most likely more secured than ninety percent of the buildings in the city."

"Speaking of, how'd you get in, anyway?"

"I'm good at lockpicking."

"Anything else you're talented in?"

"You haven't unlocked that level of our relationship yet."

Chuuya rolls his eyes and leans back against his bar. "So you have this *absurd* theory, and instead of running to the cops, you come *back* and

tell me about it? You have a death wish or something?"

"Mmm. I have to admit, getting murdered by a mafia executive would be glorious, even though I would prefer a double suicide with a beautiful woman."

"I think you should break into the office of a therapist next time. You clearly need it."

"Therapists and me don't get along, so hard pass."

That's hardly surprising. "Well, whatever you were looking for *here,* you won't find it either. You should leave and forget that this ever happened."

Dazai cocks his head. "Is that your way of showing concern for me?"

"It's a warning."

"Adorable."

"You're the most irritating person I've ever met."

"And you have probably met lots of them!"

"Damn right."

"See, I consider that an achievement."

"Yeah, no, that's not something to be proud of," Chuuya mutters. His stomach makes an unflattering noise, and he realizes that this stupid kid has crossed his plans for the night yet again. Seriously. It looks like it might take a while to get rid of him again, so Chuuya takes out his phone to, at least, order food for later.

"Who are you calling?" Dazai asks. "One of your people to take care of me?"

Chuuya throws him a look of irritation. "I just might kill you myself if continue t—"

"-ello, Kyoukarou here?"

Cutting himself off, Chuuya sucks in a vexed breath and rattles of his usual order, deliberately ignoring Dazai's curious expression following him the entire time. When he's done, he slaps his phone on the counter with a bit too much force. "So."

"Don't worry," Dazai says. "I'm not hungry anyway."

"Didn't fucking ask." Chuuya leaves his place behind the bar and slowly crosses the distance between him and the couch, coming to a stop one feet away from where Dazai's sitting cross-legged. Chuuya crosses his arms. "What do you want here? And the truth this time."

For a few moments, there's only silence. Then. "I want nothing."

"You're here, though," Chuuya points out. "There must be some sort of thinking process behind it."

Dazai shrugs lightly, and the motion *almost — just almost —* looks... cute. Chuuya clears his throat. "Can't a person just want to hang out with their mafioso friend?"

"We're not friends. I don't even know you."

"Duh, that's because you keep trying to throw me out!"

Gritting his teeth, Chuuya makes a move to grab the bastard's wrist and *drag* him out of his apartment, but at that moment, a loud crack echoes through the air before the familiar sound of pouring rain resonates.

Dazai's mouth forms into an *oooh.*

"I don't have an umbrella."

"That's not my problem."

Dazai purses his lips. "Chibi is so cruel. You know, I get sick very easily... I might get pneumonia, and you will only ever see me again in a coffin before you know it. So cruel."

Half of his life spent in the mafia, and yet here Chuuya is, being manipulated by a fucking normie *student* that's good at picking locks and picking up clues.

He'd drive him again, but his food...

"As soon as it stops raining," Chuuya points at the door, "you're going to fuck off."

"Hm, sure ~"

Chuuya decides to busy himself in the meantime, tidying up his

kitchen and checking to see if anything is missing in case the bastard decided to do something stupid earlier. The whole time, Dazai just watches him move around until he eventually picks up the remote of the TV and plays around with that.

When his door rings, Chuuya's grateful, not only because he's starving, but because it will give him something to do. He unpacks the food at his table, hardly surprised to see Dazai make his way over like a cat looking for something to eat.

"I thought you weren't hungry," he says, taking a scoop of rice.

Dazai kneels down to his right. "I'm not, but it's hard to carry a conversation with so much space between us."

"I said you can stay, not talk to me."

"You know, I take back what I said earlier. Your awful attitude probably makes it very hard to get *anyone* into your bed."

Chuuya can't help but laugh. "My attitude's perfectly fine to people that aren't annoying eighteen-year-old kids who are too bored for their own good."

"I'm twenty-one."

A piece of chicken gets stuck in Chuuya's throat, and he has to cough a few times to answer. "You sure don't fucking act like it."

"How old are you?"

"Not telling you that."

"You don't look much older — and your height's the one of a twelve-year-old — but you act like a sixty-year-old man."

"I do not!"

"Yes, you do."

"I'm twenty-one!"

"Ohhh," Dazai says, "so we're the same age."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"It means a lot."

Chuuya lets out a puff of breath and pointedly turns away, eating in silence.

"Ehhh, Chuuya."

"..."

"Chibi."

"..."

"Chibikko."

"..."

"Chuuuuuuya ~" A finger pokes his cheek, and Chuuya's forced to slap it away from his face.

"What?!"

"What's it like being in the mafia?"

"Why don't you just google it?"

"But Google isn't an actual mafioso. You are!"

"There are tons of snitches that talked about what's it like."

Dazai lets out a loud, over-dramatic sigh and puts his chin on his hand. "I guess I could try to find a mafia story in that horrid book collection of yours."

"What do you know about literature, anyways?"

"I study it, for one."

"Ah," Chuuya says with a hum. "So, that's why you're so annoying?"

Dazai's face morphs into an amused grin. "So chibi's not only stubborn but judgemental."

"I just counted one and one together, idiot." Chuuya returns to his Peking Duck, willing to ignore the bastard sabotaging his nights two days in a row. Dazai, of course, has other plans.

"How does so much food fit into such a tiny body?"

"I'm not tiny, bastard."

"You're not big either."

"Just because I'm not ten feet tall like the rest of you doesn't mean I'm *tiny!* I *work out* more than you probably have in your entire life."

"Oh? Prove it then."

Chuuya cuts himself off, raising his brows. Is Dazai trying to hit on him?

Dazai lets out a sigh and fiddles with the hem of his sweater. "Now, you should be taking off your clothes and prove me wrong, Chuuya, but I see my method of approach isn't quite working."

Wow.

"Shouldn't you.." Chuuya searches for words. "... be writing essays dissecting books or something?"

"Oh, now that you mention it. Yes. It's boring me to death, however, and I find conversing with someone that works in the mafia much more interesting."

"Why'd you even study it if it's boring?" Chuuya asks, ignoring the other part. The conversation is a bit of an exaggeration for the thing they have going here.

Dazai glances back at him. "It was less tedious than all the other subjects." His thoughtful expression shifts into a grin then. "Maybe I should have become a mafia member like you. Could you imagine?"

Chuuya doesn't grace him with an answer, instead getting up to put the trash away, but he can't help but actually imagine this book nerd in the mafia. No. Dazai's too... he doesn't belong in a place like that. Some people are born in blood — Chuuya was — but others too easily crack under the heavy shackles of blind loyalty and the rope around their neck.

"You know," he says, "you could, at least, offer to help do the dishes if you're already here."

Dazai basically melts into a puddle at the table. "No, thanks. I would rather die."

Fighting against a grin, Chuuya beckons him over. "C'mon. This isn't free real estate here." Maybe *that* will make Dazai leave.

Surprisingly enough, Dazai actually stands up — or rather, he forces himself to, his shoulders hunching like he's being sent to prison instead of the sink. "One day, Chuuya will see."

"See what?"

"That you should have treated me better."

"I'm treating you perfectly fine for a kid who keeps breaking into my apartment and disturbs my nights." Chuuya hands him the sponge and turns on the water. "Here."

The realization that Dazai's bandages will become all wet and gross comes too late, when Dazai reluctantly, but without any more complaining, starts scrubbing the plates in the sink. Chuuya would have offered him gloves, but he ran out of them yesterday, and it's too late anyway. So he makes himself comfortable on the other side and dries off the dishes.

"Here," Dazai grumbles as he hands over the last fork, "you evil munchkin who exploits poor college students."

"Anyone ever tell you that you're really dramatic?"

"No. They usually say other things."

Chuuya doesn't know what that means, but he's too busy staring at the wet things around Dazai's wrist anyway. Without thinking, he reaches out, touching the gaze. "Let me give you new ones."

Dazai doesn't move. When Chuuya looks up, he realizes, Dazai doesn't even *breathe.* "Dazai?"

There's a harsh exhale. "Okay."

Chuuya leaves him on the couch while getting the necessary things from his first aid kit that he uses on a regular basis. Part of him is prepared to prod the guy about the bandages, but all the questions die down once he settles across from him and sees the plethora of thin, white lines running along the, now bare, skin of his arm. Chuuya has spent so much time of his life trying to *survive*, that seeing people who *seek* the literal opposite makes him bristle. Of course, it's never that easy. He has felt pain that cut so deep he'd have done anything to stop it.

Maybe Dazai has, too.

Smoothly pushing his thoughts and feelings aside, Chuuya grabs the dressings and Dazai's arm for stabilization. It's faint, but Dazai shivers, and for one brief moment, their eyes meet before Chuuya heavy-heartedly return to his work. He wraps the bandages around Dazai's skinny wrist, up to his palm, fixates it with a pin, and then does the same on the other side. When he's done, Chuuya looks out of the window.

"It stopped raining."

"Ah," Dazai hums. "I guess I have no more excuse to stay then."

It's so blunt and honest, yet it still doesn't make any sense. What is it that makes Dazai stay here so badly? They don't know each other. They're nothing but a pair of strangers who happen to be the same age.

"You don't," Chuuya says, but the words feel like lead on his tongue for the first time. Why is he feeling *guilty* over kicking him out all of a sudden?

Dazai gets up with a yawn and collects his bearings before sluggishly heading for the door, Chuuya right behind him. When they reach it, Dazai turns around, tilting his head. "This is goodbye then. It was nice to meet you."

"Sure. See ya, Dazai," Chuuya replies, a bit thrown off by the sudden change in his tone.

"I don't think you will," Dazai says with an adroit, little smile. "I hope you have a long life of reading smutty books and take-out dinners, and whatever it is, you mafia people do... good night, Chuuya."

And that's it. Dazai leaves, the door falling softly shut, and Chuuya just... stands there rooted to the spot. He doesn't understand the feeling in his chest. That hollow silence sounding way too loud all of a sudden. He wanted to be finally left alone, right? He wanted a night for himself without any interruptions.

But Dazai was — there was just something off about him and the entire situation, and it leaves Chuuya feeling off-kilter.

Chapter 2: Team Harry and Draco

Chapter Notes

> warnings:
> - suicide attempt: the attempt itself is in the beginning, not graphic or anything, but it's mentioned quite often throughout the rest of the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It comes to him a few hours later, in the middle of restless sleep.

Dazai's last words sounded like a goodbye.

A *final* goodbye — one would say before... dying.

It makes sense, too. Why he would drink himself into a stupor all by himself time and time again. No friends — or at least, none that care. His reckless behavior when he had a literal knife pointed at him; his reckless behavior when he *came back* after he concluded Chuuya was a mafia member. The hints that he's prone to accidents. The scars and bandages on his body. His last words.

The guy was one walking cry for help, and Chuuya refused to listen. He didn't fucking notice.

It doesn't take any time at all to decide to rush out of bed and run down the stairs to his car. Chuuya doesn't care that he's still in his pajamas or that his hair looks like a bird's nest. There might still be a chance.

Maybe he's not too late.

He drives the route to Dazai's apartment in half the time it took him yesterday, stepping on the gas and cutting more than a few red lights.

Chuuya doesn't understand why he cares so much. Dazai's a stranger. It's still a life, though, one that he could save, for once, instead of taking it. It's proof he can be good, too.

Chuuya tries ringing Dazai's buzzer first, just in case, but the seven attempts only increase his suspicions. Even if Dazai's sleeping... he would have heard, right? He quickly breaks the door open with his ability before checking which floor Dazai lives on, then does the same

with the second door. It's not easy finding his apartment since this is a fucking dorm, Chuuya realizes as he walks down the hallway, and there are only numbers, no names. Dazai is 479.

There.

479.

Just like Chuuya's.

479.

He knocks, but no one opens.

Chuuya takes a breath and pushes the door open, uninterested in the fact that he's destroying property, and enters, preparing for the worst possible scenario.

It's small, a tiny hallway that's also kitchen leading immediately to the single room. Dazai's lying on a futon, his face tucked in the sheets...

A bottle of gin is standing right next to it; a bunch of pain killers, too.

"Hey," he kneels down, grabbing Dazai's face, "wake up—"

His eyes flutter open, sluggish, and dazed.

"Did you swallow all those pills? You have to throw them up—"

"I don't have to do *anything,"* Dazai mutters, surprisingly lucid as he slaps Chuuya's hands away. "Chuuya should leave me alone!"

"*Fuck no*. I'll personally make sure every single one of those pills gets out!"

Before he can try to get his fingers into Dazai's mouth, the idiot scoots back on the futon, sending him a hateful glare. "They're all already out!"

Chuuya freezes. A breath escapes him. "Really? You changed your mind?" His chest sags with relief. "*Thank god*."

"It wasn't voluntary," Dazai murmurs as he brings up a hand to his forehead, wiping away sweaty bangs. "Painkillers nowadays simply aren't enough to kill, only enough to make you violently sick. Shame."

"*No*," Chuuya snaps, "*thank fucking god*. What were you thinking?"

For the first time since they met, Dazai's mask vanishes, replaced by an expression that lacks any sort of liveliness or substance. His eyes drill into Chuuya. "What does it matter? We're strangers."

Damn it.

"Doesn't fucking mean you should go and swallow a bottle of pins."

"Shouldn't you of all people be familiar with death? It's a natural part of life. I would just like to speed up the process."

That's the question. Chuuya *is* used to death. He was born in it, actually, when he first opened his eyes in a pile of rubble, a fine veil of pink mist hanging in the air, the death of a million people on his hands. Death found him when he was young; death followed him wherever he went after that. But he doesn't lie awake at night feeling guilty for all the blood on his hands. And yet, here he is, begging a guy he has known for less than two days not to leave.

"Just... don't." Chuuya's sure Dazai already heard all variations of *life isn't all bad,* and *there's still so much you have to experience*, so he doesn't bother with that. Instead, he gets up and offers Dazai his hand. "Come with me."

Dazai inspects his palm with suspicion before raising a brow. "To your fancy penthouse?"

"Yes."

"Why? Are you feeling sorry for me all of a sudden?"

Saying *no* would be a lie since this is technically what happened and what it looks like, but it's more than that...

"Kinda," Chuuya admits, "you need help, I'm offering it. And don't —" he narrows his eyes "— try to act like you're all above it now. You were begging to bother me for the last two days, so just accept my offer and get your scrawny ass up."

Dazai lets out an artificial sigh, deliberately letting Chuuya struggle, before eventually taking his hand. Chuuya can feel the idiot's fingers shiver a bit as he pulls him on his feet. It's not the first time. Either he's just really not used to touching people or scared of it. Both these options make Chuuya's stomach twist painfully while they walk out of the door.

—

Dazai's quiet in the car, cuddled up in one of the rose pastel sweaters that he took with him, his eyes looking at the streets fly by.

Chuuya hasn't said much either. All of this happened so quickly, he didn't have any time to think it through properly. What does *come with me* even mean? Dazai can't stay forever. Not if he doesn't want to become the target of port mafia's enemies looking for any possible weaknesses to exploit. Maybe until he's feeling a bit better — physically, at least — because of his mental state although Chuuya doubts something like this can be fixed in a few nights.

It doesn't matter.

He'll figure something out.

When they pull into Chuuya's parking lot, illuminated by a street lamp, he glances at Dazai. "You feeling okay? Do you need me to help you walk?"

"I'm just feeling sick," Dazai mutters with an eye-roll, "I'm not *dying*. Sadly."

"Shut up. Your stomach's probably still in ruins. I'll call a doctor who will take a look at you first thing in the morning."

As Dazai gets out of the car, he huffs out a little breath. "Ohhh, getting treated by mafia doctors. How *exciting."*

Chuuya, as always, doesn't comment on it. His utter lack of statement towards his profession is probably answer enough, but he refuses to give the idiot the satisfaction. Let him wonder for the rest of eternity.

On the walk from the car to the elevator, Chuuya catches Dazai swaying from time to time, though he doesn't say anything about it. He must still be nauseous. Chuuya could do both of them a favor and just pick Dazai up and get them inside through his balcony, but that would *obviously* give away *For The Tainted Sorrow*, which is something Chuuya has managed to avoid doing in front of civilians.

If Dazai talks and his ability gets exposes...

Not good.

Of course, Chuuya could carry him without any help, too, but he

doubts Dazai's tempered enough to allow it right now, his expression grumpy and irritated.

"Chuuya does realize that I'm going to obliterate his toilet?"

It comes so out of the blue, Chuuya almost chokes on his spit, mouth turning upwards. "Uh, I guess? Don't worry about it, though. I have three bathrooms."

"Three?!"

"Yeah. I figured you already knew since you explored my apartment, you bastard."

"Ehhh, I stuck to the obvious areas. I wasn't sure if I'd trigger some sort of explosives, and I obviously had to tell you about my marvelous theory first."

"*Obviously*," Chuuya says, unlocking his door and letting them inside. "Make yourself comfortable. Destroy the toilet. Whatever you feel like."

"Chuuya's suspiciously nice," Dazai comments as he glides out of his black slippers. "Can I sleep in your bed?"

"I have a guest room. And a comfortable couch."

"Uh-uh, but your bed's nicer."

Chuuya feels himself struggle a moment before relenting with a huff. "Whatever. Just don't shit your pants there."

"Chibi's gross!"

"You brought it up!"

He leaves the idiot to his own devices as he disappears into the kitchen. It's a bit past five in the morning, and Chuuya doubts he will get much sleep, so he might as well prepare something to eat for both of them. With all the puking and the freaking alcohol Dazai inhaled, he will be hungry, too.

The sausage's already in the fry pan by the time Dazai makes an appearance, looking pale but steady. "I puked it all out. I'm now gloriously empty."

"Good," Chuuya says. "Sit down. Food will be ready in a few."

"So late at night?"

"*Yeah.* You just said you're fucking empty, and your stomach needs food to cope with that."

"Whatever you say."

Once the sausages are ready, he puts them on a plate and carries it to the table where the rest of the food and Dazai are waiting.

"Do you have classes tomorrow?"

Dazai makes a face. "Way to ruin the mood."

"The mood didn't exist in the first place. So?"

"Yes."

Chuuya calculates the route from his apartment to the university Dazai attends in his head. It's quite a way. Almost an hour of traveling. "Are you going to go? Or do you want to take a day off?"

Dazai shoves the food on his plate back and forth, sighing into his hand. "Maybe yes, maybe not. It remains a mystery."

"You know, it's important to keep a routine but it's also important to take a break if you need it."

"You sound like one of those annoying positivity posts on the internet."

Chuuya's jaw clenches. "I'm trying to be *helpful*."

Dazai's eyes slowly travel up until they meet his glare, and he cocks his brow. "How exactly do you think you're going to help me, Chuuya?"

Good question. Next one?

"Do you think that pretending to be my friend and care for me for a few days will make me happy and whole again? That the thought of suicide will never ever cross my mind again?"

"Don't," Chuuya says lowly. "I never said that I want to cure you."

"Then what is your goal here?"

"I could ask you the same." After a moment, Chuuya adds, "I think the only way out that place you're in is professional help. Something long-term. But that doesn't mean that a little support in the meantime will hurt, so shut the fuck up and eat your food. You barely touched it."

Dazai's stare lasts for another second before he gives in, taking a bite of the soy sausage even if he does so with a mild grimace. They don't talk for the rest of the meal, but the silence isn't awkward or tense. It's peaceful actually, so much that Chuuya feels energized and clear in his head despite the lack of sleep. He'll have to fit a nap into his schedule before work or add three extra cups of coffee, but he feels good now. And Dazai seems fine, too, only slightly pissed off.

When they're done, Chuuya tilts his head. "Do you want to sleep?"

"I don't want anything."

"Uh, okay, drama queen, but do you *plan* to sleep?"

"I guess."

"Okay. If something comes up, I'll be in the guest room or somewhere around the apartment."

Dazai nods and leaves the table. Chuuya stays on his knees for a moment, assessing the current situation he's in. Letting a stranger sleep in his apartment for the second day in a row. If any of his friends get wind of this at the headquarters, Chuuya will never hear the end of it. There's already enough teasing going around about that one time he stopped in the middle of a mission to pick up a stray kitten.

Dazai will have to stay a secret. The jokes aside. It's for his safety.

Chuuya uses his free time to tidy up the kitchen and finally catches up on some necessary deep-cleaning he's been avoiding for a while before double-checking his security system in- and outside the apartment. Once that's done, he goes to his balcony with a fresh cup of coffee and a cigarette to call the doctor he mentioned earlier. It's not someone from the mafia — it can't be, but Chuuya still has a few open-minded underworld connections that turn out to be useful every now and then.

When he passes his bedroom on the way to the guest room, Chuuya's eyes can't help but peek inside. The door's open, and Dazai's clutching one of the pillows to his chest again, eyes squeezed shut. By all means, Chuuya shouldn't feel the need to smile at the sight of a civilian

college student, who's remarkably annoying at that, in his own bed, but here he is, feeling an odd warmth spread through from his chest to every part of his body as if it's trying to escape him.

He spends his free time trying to finish his damn book but actually being on the phone with his subordinates, preparing for an undercover mission. When his phone dings with an *I'm here X* text, it's already nine.

Enter *Yosano Akiko.*

Wearing a lowcut black blazer, a leather belt strapped around her waist, and matching black slacks, she looks exactly like one would expect an underground doctor to look like — or, maybe not, but Chuuya has always been fond of the sight. He's known Yosano even before he joined the mafia, going to her with injured or half-dead sheep members more times than he can count. She's saved the lives of the people he loved time and time again, always with a marvelous grin on her face and perfectly manicured nails. It's been a while since Chuuya's had to call her, though.

"I would say I'm happy to see you, darling," Yosano says once the door falls shut, "but you woke me up at seven in the morning, so your face makes me murderous."

Chuuya smirks and gives her a kiss on the cheek. "Good morning to you, too, Akiko-san. You look good."

"Of course, I do," she says, taking a look around. "Now, where is this boy of yours?"

"Bedroom."

"Since when are you off the market, and why haven't I heard about it?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes as he leads her down the hallways. "I'm not. He's just some guy I met." Explaining the entire situation requires more nerves than he has right now. "In a nonsexual way."

"Ah," Yosano's smirk grows, "taking care of the poor and broken again. You know, you're like a superhero in villain disguise."

"I'm everything but a —"

The door to his room swings open the second they reach it, Dazai,

dressed like he's going somewhere, meeting them.

"Hey," Chuuya says.

Dazai's eyes are so very wide for the empty look in them. "Oh, hello. I was just leaving —"

"No, you're not." Chuuya frowns. "You're staying."

"And better sit down at that, buttercup," Yosano adds. "I need to examine you."

"I don't need to do *anything*. This is a *free* country —" The idiot tries to push past them, but Chuuya steps sideways, blocking the only free spot. Yosano does the same. They're a wall.

"You didn't mention your boy was scared of doctors."

"That's news to me too." Chuuya shoots Dazai a look. "I told you I'm going to call someone. Stop being a baby and let her examine you."

"I'm doing perfectly fine, there's no need for such drastic measures," Dazai argues, raising his chin.

Chuuya sighs. *Okay.* He brings up his right hand until it rests on Dazai's chest, right above where his heart should be, the other wrapping around Dazai's wrist, and then he gently pushes him backwards. He feels Dazai hesitate; he feels his heart beating, *racing;* ultimately, his determination yields, and Chuuya walks him to the bed like that, forcing him to sit down.

It's funny how such a strong personality weakens as soon as Chuuya touches him. As soon as anyone does, probably.

Yosano watches it all unfold from the doorway, then takes Chuuya's place in front of Dazai and starts unpacking her medical beg. "My name's Yosano, by the way," she says, picking up a stethoscope. "If you feel any sort of pain and residing effects from the medication you took, please tell me..."

Dazai's unusual silence and agitation during the examination make Chuuya's spine shiver with something like guilt for forcing him to do this when he's clearly uncomfortable. What he did was dangerous, though, and Chuuya wants to make sure he's in the clear. Dazai only perks up by the end of it when Yosano nods at the numbers on the hemodynamometer.

"I said I was fine," Dazai huffs, "but nobody ever listens to me in this house."

Chuuya scoffs. Yosano smiles, amused. "You *should be* fine, but I'll leave these pills with you in case you experience any more nausea or discomfort."

"Thank you, Akiko-san."

"Of course, darling." Her eyes flicker to Chuuya and narrow. "I know you're busy saving strays and being rich, but I'd appreciate hearing your voice once in a while when someone *isn't* bleeding out on your side of the phone."

God, he's an ass. "I will," he says as he follows her to the door. "I'm sorry, I know I've been MIA..."

"Your apologies only mean something when your actions say the same," Yosano says and lightly punches his shoulder, making him grimace not from the pain but because of himself. "Now, don't look like that, just... don't be a stranger."

"Yes. Thank you again. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Take care of your boy. I have a feeling this one's more difficult than your usual ones."

Chuuya snorts as he gives her a goodbye kiss on the cheek. "Still, not *my* boy."

Yosano only winks, and then she's out of the door, as quickly gone as she appeared here — a force of nature, if you will. A smile hangs off his lips, though. He likes Yosano.

"She didn't seem to be from the mafia," a voice says behind him, and Chuuya turns to find Dazai lingering in the doorway. "Well, she didn't seem like a normal doctor either, but Yosano wouldn't have said that last part if you were in the same... workplace, would she? Or is it normal to not cross paths for years at a time?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "You know, I could be an accountant. Or a veterinary."

"Unless you can magically cure unicorn cancer or make people's debts vanish, I highly doubt those people get enough money to afford *this* penthouse."

"Maybe I inherited it?"

"Or maybe," Dazai says, taking a step towards him. "You're just full of shit."

It's funny — Chuuya hasn't heard him curse so far, and it sounds oddly adorable, but the smile creeping up his face ebbs away when his phone buzzes. "Well," Chuuya says with a sigh. "We might never find out because I have to go."

"Oh, off to save a basilisk?"

Chuuya grins as he goes to his room to put on some fresh clothes. "So you do read other books than classics?"

"Harry potter might as well be a classic now," he hears Dazai grumble behind him.

"Were you team Hermione and Harry or Hermione and Ron?"

"Team Harry and Draco."

"Oh, *spicy*."

Chuuya doesn't even consider closing the door or turning around when he strips out of his clothes; the thought only flitting through his mind when he sees Dazai's eyes rake over his body. It's a contradiction to the way he reacted to the small touches before. Dazai's not shy about looking, not shy about much, really, and Chuuya likes that because most of his modesty has been stripped throughout his life if it even existed in the first place. If you grow up on the streets with a bunch of homeless kids, privacy isn't in your vocabulary.

"When are you going to be back?"

"Dunno," Chuuya says, shrugging on a fresh button-up shirt. "Probably around twelve o'clock."

"The mafia work hours seem horrid if you ask me."

Chuuya huffs. "Not today, satan." Then something else comes to his mind. "Hey, you want my phone number? In case you need anything?"

Dazai narrows his eyes at him. "And what could I possibly want from you? Awful book recommendations?"

"Oh, fuck off, already." Even though the answer was a clear no,

Chuuya scrambles through one of his drawers to find a sheet of paper where he scribbles down his phone number in sloppy writing. "Call that number if you need anything at all."

"You're really letting me stay here?"

"Yeah."

"What if I rob this place?"

Chuuya can't help but smirk as he looks at Dazai. "*Oh no*, whatever will I do? I guess finding something new would be a hassle, but I have several beautiful residencies where I could spend my time waiting. I doubt there's anything you can take here that I can't replace."

Dazai narrows his eyes. "What if I announce to the world that a powerful mafioso lives here?"

"Oh, sweetheart, you can't even imagine the painful things I'd to you." He brushes past the idiot. "You said you were smart. I trust you will behave smart, too."

Finally, the only sound he hears is an aggravated sigh, making Chuuya smile as he grabs his coat from the hanger in his hallway. "As I said, I left you my number if you need anything. My neighbors are rarely home, so they shouldn't be a problem." Chuuya frowns. "My sink acts up from time to time, but you can just ignore it. I'll have to call a drain cleaner one of these days."

"How reassuring."

"Shut up. Anyways, see you later. Don't do anything stupid. I *will* find out, and I *will* kill you."

"Have fun, murdering people!"

"Bye!"

—

As easy as it was letting Dazai stay in his apartment, focusing on work with that knowledge isn't. Chuuya's thoughts keep drifting off even though he's supposed to focus on the task, which is, finding one of their people that has gone astray in the last twenty-four hours. Chuuya's proud to say he's a respected member of port mafia, but he's also one of the most feared because his ability is not only perfect for

battle but excellent for torture too. So whenever there's a case of betrayal, Mori always lets Chuuya make an example out of them.

Eventually, the guy shows up crossing the street Chuuya's subordinates have been monitoring with a hoodie and a cap drawn over his head. Seriously. He needs to get taught a lesson for that disguise, alone.

Chuuya lets his subordinates do the work of catching him, too; a bit of combat training never hurt anybody, especially those brats that think they're already on top of the world just because they wear a black suit and sunglasses. Working for the mafia and *belonging* to it are two things that many deem as the same one, but in reality, they're worlds apart.

Back at the headquarters, Chuuya gives in and dials his own number. It rings several times — truth be told, he doesn't think the idiot will pick up but then...

"Camp half-blood, Percy Jackson on the phone. How may I help you?"

Chuuya snorts. Loudly. "Wow, you sure you're Percy Jackson and not Grover?"

"If anyone's half-goat here, it's you, chibi. An annoying voice and horns."

Ignoring that, Chuya sighs. "Is everything all right?"

"There have been no sink troubles if that's what you're worried about."

"What would you have done if it wasn't me on the phone?"

"Tell them to take it up with Aries, of course."

For the first time in his life, Chuuya's really grateful that the business partners he's dealing with on behalf of Mori only ever get his phone number — never his house number. He doesn't even want to imagine what they would think of an introduction like this.

"Well," Chuuya says. "If you're still there, you must have not robbed me yet. I'm glad you're using that brain of yours for something useful."

"Your standards are exceptionally low for a mafioso, you know."

"It's because they're set to *you*, right now."

There's a huff on the other side. "I can hang up now, right? Goodbye, hatrack." The line *actually* goes dead, and Chuuya, who's not really used to this treatment, scowls at his phone.

"Hey."

He looks up to see Tachihara in the doorway, hands in the pockets of his jacket. "What are you up to?"

"Just checking in with an important client."

"That's cool."

Chuuya smirks. Tachihara *wants* something, and it's painfully apparent, but he's also a bit awkward, so every time this happens, Chuuya usually takes the reins.

"Want to grab a drink later?"

And that's when Chuuya's expression falters. As much as he'd want to have a quick fuck tonight — and god, does he need one — he ... he has someone waiting for him at home. And Chuuya's not going to be an asshole that comes in five minutes and then leaves Tachihara hanging. "Sorry," he says. "Busy tonight."

"Oh, hot date?"

"No, I just... recently adopted a kitten."

"A kitten?" Tachihara blinks. "Like, a cat?"

"Yeah."

"And you're bailing on me for... that?"

Well, now that he says it like that, Chuuya should have come up with something better than a kitten. "It's a really demanding kitten. He doesn't eat. He shits everywhere. I have to teach him a few things, you know."

"Okay." Tachihara nods and gives him a two-fingered salute. "You know where to find me if you change your mind."

As he watches Tachihara leave, Chuuya lets out a few grumbled curses into his fist. Dazai's just *one* man, one person, and he's already turning half of his life on his feet. How the fuck did that happen.

The rest of his workday passes agonizingly slow, but at least, when he drives home, he's already crossed off every plan he had in his head for the night because, knowing dazai, he won't get to do any of it. Sure enough, the second he enters his apartment, he feels something off. This time, it's the smell.

It fucking *stinks*.

"Dazai!" he shouts. "The fuck did you do?"

The voice that replies comes from the kitchen. "The better question should be what I *didn't* do, and the answer is that I didn't rob you, nor did I share your address with the internet ~!"

Chuuya stalks down the hallway, prepared to yell, but when he finally spots Dazai at the table — one that is set with dishes and food and even candles — his irritation ebbs away, especially because, despite his smart-ass response, the look on Dazai's face is *sheepish*, almost embarrassed.

"I made food."

Chuuya's eyes fall to the food in question: chicken hotpot. "I can see that," he replies. "Did you burn it afterwards or something?"

"It's not my fault your stove is really strange."

"My stove is perfect."

"Then mine isn't, and I'm used to a bit less fire and heat."

Even though the smell of something charred still lingers in the air, the food looks good, a bit burned at some spots, but oh well. "Should I be worried?" Chuuya asks as he shrugs off his coat and hangs it over the back of his chair before sitting down. "Just so you know, I can taste poison." One of the first lessons at mafia 101.

Dazai rolls his eyes and takes a bite of his food. "Now, why would I do that? I did enough puking already."

"I don't know, something about that double suicide you mentioned."

"With a beautiful woman," Dazai points out like it makes all the difference. "You only fill one of these criteria. Right?"

"Right." Chuuya pours wine into his glass. "I'm just having trouble believing that you would do something nice for me."

"That's where stupid little chibi's wrong. This was something nice for *me.* You merely happened to come back from your murder job at the time."

Chuuya can't really believe Dazai would do something nice for himself either, but that's a topic for another day. The food does taste... okay, some of the pieces, anyway — and as far as he can taste, it's not poisoned either. It's actually nice. Coming home, and there's already food waiting for him. If there weren't the whole *partners are a luxury when you work for the mafia* thing, Chuuya would reconsider his dating and relationship policies.

"So, how was your day?" Dazai asks. "Did you get to kill people?"

"I found a werewolf and called him *Toto*."

"The ones that shift into actual wolves or those that just turn into hideous and hairy people?"

"A healthy mix of both."

"Can I visit him? I've always wanted to see one."

"Sorry, no civilians allowed."

"What if I show them a magic trick?"

Chuuya cocks his head. "What, making things burn?"

"Making things... *stop."*

"Are you trying to imply that murdering is your magic trick?"

"Eh, chibi is really dense." Dazai lifts his hand, and a calmness settles over him as he regards it, slowly twisting it this way and that way. "Do you remember that woman in the news a few weeks ago that robbed a bank with her telepathy ability?"

"Yeah?"

"And how the police force struggled to retain her because she kept escaping?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I could have stopped her ability," Dazai proclaims, his eyes sliding from his hand to Chuuya. Cool. Alert. Gauging his reaction.

"That's my magic trick."

Chuuya has to leave it to him. He's surprised. He didn't expect that. And maybe it shows for a few seconds how quiet and unresponsive he's gotten, but he quickly gathers his wits and shoots Dazai a look. "I don't know if that's cool enough. No one wants a party pooper at their workplace, don't you think?"

Dazai's lashes flutter as he looks at Chuuya. "What if the werewolf goes rabid?"

"Easiest case, we take him out. Worst case, we have a good fight and then take him out."

Lips pressed together, Dazai turns up his nose. It looks cute, especially because Chuuya knows he caused this annoyance. Two people can play this game.

By now, he thinks he's starting to understand Dazai's bizarre behavior — on a surface level, at least. He's clearly bored with life. And — not brave, not from what Chuuya can tell, just really fucking careless about it. It makes sense why he would search out a person like Chuuya, pushing ten feet closer every time Chuuya says that it's too dangerous. Maybe it's just another cry for help, a seemingly *easier* solution to just get caught in the crossfire instead of going through with the act of suicide.

Either way, Dazai's wrong. The mafia is not easier. The mafia isn't like anything he probably imagines. Less epic. Less interesting. More painful. Way more paperwork than one might assume.

"I'm going to go to my classes tomorrow," Dazai announces and makes Chuuya's eyes snap to him.

"You will?"

"That is what I said. Is your hearing all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Attitude," Chuuya says, tossing a napkin at his face. "That's good. Do you want to leave tonight or in the morning?"

"Tonight. I didn't pack the things I need, and I don't want to travel halfway across the city."

That's... valid.

"I can drive you back," Chuuya offers.

"If you insist," Dazai mumbles like it's an *inconvenience.* That brat.

Chuuya's grinning, though, because he has an idea — which must wait for later. Instead, he gets up and starts clearing the table, pointedly shoving Dazai's barely-touched plate towards him.

Dazai pointedly *shoves it away.*

"Have you even eaten today?" Chuuya snaps.

"Yes."

"What?"

"The breakfast you made me!"

Chuuya blinks. "That's it?"

Dazai makes a shooing motion with his hand. "Stop looking at me like that."

"You should eat more," Chuuya tells him, opening his dishwasher. "You can't survive on one and a half meals a day, idiot."

"First of all, yes. Me sitting here should be evidence enough. Second, why should I eat when I'm not hungry?"

"Why would you breathe even if you're not a fan of the taste?"

"You're comparing apples and bananas."

"And you're fucking annoying."

"But I am right."

"No, you're just a stubborn little brat," Chuuya mutters, throwing a towel over his shoulder as he wipes off the surface of the counter. "Hey, you want to give me your number?"

With Dazai going back to his dorm, he'd feel a lot better if he could check up on him every once in a while, see that Dazai's doing fine. Sustaining something like an actual friendship probably won't be possible. Chuuya made a habit of only keeping close with colleagues, not willing to endanger any innocent civilians, especially in case he gets attached.

(It's a vicious circle, really. Leaving the mafia would mean leaving your family and friends, and who would ever want to be alone? Chuuya's too deep, though, to care about it anymore.)

A few texts or calls will help ease his mind, though.

"Are you hitting on me?"

"*Yes*," Chuuya lies and mockingly lies a hand over his heart. "There's no one I want more than the poor college student who keeps ending up at my doorstep like a bedraggled kitten looking for a home." When Dazai's brows furrow into a scowl, Chuuya waves his hand through the air. "*No, I'm not hitting on you, idiot*. I respect myself too much to be interested in someone who isn't into guys."

Dazai stands up at that. "Why would you think that?"

Chuuya tilts his head. "Well, you keep mentioning you only want to die by a woman's side. I figured that's your version of saying *no homo*."

"Stop figuring then," Dazai mutters. "Chuuya's really stupid."

"Okay. Good for you. But are you going to give me your number or not? You know, I could just find out myself, too."

"Ah, veterinaries and accountants can do that now?"

"*I* can do that," Chuuya tells him with a smirk before holding out his phone. "Your number. Pronto."

Dazai carefully wraps his fingers around the device, somehow managing not to touch him, and it breaks Chuuya's heart all over again. Either he just doesn't like touching, or this guy is really fucking touch starved. When Dazai returns his phone, Chuuya takes his hand and doesn't let go, catching his gaze.

"Does this bother you?"

Dazai's eyes fall to their linked hands, his muscles stiff and cold. "No," he says slowly as if he isn't sure about his reply.

"Then — can I do something?"

"Okay..."

Chuuya withdraws his hand and instead steps forward, wrapping his arms around Dazai. One hand slides down the length of his back. The

other gently presses to the side of his neck.

"What... are you doing?" Dazai asks, not moving, not *breathing*.

"Hugging you."

"*Why*."

"Because I'm pretty sure you didn't get to do this a lot in your life," Chuuya murmurs and pulls him even closer until every inch of him is pressed against that idiot.

After they're done fucking, Tachihara always says Chuuya's like a furnace, *feverishly hot*, sometimes using it as an excuse to be lazy in bed for a while.

Despite the bandages wrapped around every visible part of Dazai, he's *cold*. So incredibly cold. Like there's a hole in his body somewhere that lets all the warmth leak out.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Dazai doesn't answer. He doesn't hug him back either.

That's okay.

Chuuya's not sure how long they stand there in his kitchen, illuminated by candles and gentle moonlight, but eventually, he lets out a yawn and decides that Dazai should, at least, try to get some sleep today, pulling away.

The silence between them as they get ready to head out of the door is peaceful, relaxed, and only gets broken when they're outside and Chuuya leads them past his Bugatti.

"Another car?" Dazai guesses.

"Oh, like ten more," Chuuya feels his smirk grow, "but we're not going to drive a car."

That's when they reach his *bike*. Flashy, pink, and *gorgeous*.

If Chuuya could fuck a motorcycle, he would fuck this one.

Dazai's decidedly silent next to him. "That's..."

"Don't tell me you're scared," Chuuya teases. It should be perfect for

someone like Dazai. There are other ways to seek a rush and a break from endless monotony than death — many great ways and this one's the easiest and by far, the most common.

"Won't I get cold?"

Scoffing, Chuuya turns to him and zips up the beige vintage jacket he's wearing. "Once September ends, it will be colder, yes, but tonight's a warm night. You'll be fine." He raises his brow. "You up for it?"

Dazai's eyes slide to the bike, then back to Chuuya before he lets out a long sigh. "Fine."

Chuuya gives him quick but efficient instructions, then hands him the second helmet and climbs on the bike. "You'll have to hang on tight," he shouts over the roar of the engine as he feels Dazai awkwardly settle behind him. "Like, *really* hold on. Don't be shy."

"I'm not *shy,*" he hears Dazai mutter.

"One last thing," Chuuya cranes his neck around and shoots him a wide grin, "try to enjoy every fucking minute of it."

Dazai huffs like it's a joke, but Chuuya's intuition is pretty good, and he's almost 100% sure he'll end up loving it. There was a time — his first few months at the mafia — when Chuuya felt like Dazai, stuck in a hole of dullness and leeching sorrow. He wanted his family back. His friends. He didn't want to work for some old fucker with greasy hair, telling him to do this and that, weaving him deeper and deeper into the cobweb that's the mafia. Chuuya couldn't leave without endangering the sheep, so he tried everything possible to just stop that fucking *misery* and discovered his passion for racing and driving in that process. He got used to life as a mafioso over the years, learned how to turn his feelings into battle fuel, but his habits stuck anyway.

If they are anything alike, Dazai will enjoy this.

Chuuya lets go of the clutch and eases their way into the traffic. For a while, he keeps it simple, until he's sure that Dazai's hands are wrapped around him tight enough; then he takes the longer route to the dorms and kicks up the speed several notches. Dazai presses closer. Chuuya's heart *soars.* They fly over the deserted streets.

Call him delusional, but Chuuya feels it; he feels the moment Dazai's death-grip around him shifts from horror to something more blazing, like digging your fingers into someone's skin as the kisses grow more

and more desperate with each second.

It rattles his lungs. It makes him dizzy with the desire to shake Dazai and tell him that the adrenaline he so desperately wants is right *here*, just a hand away; that all he has to do is stretch out his arms and reach for it; all he has to is say *yes*.

When they arrive at their destination, Chuuya can't fight off the smile tugging at his lips, too fucking excited to see Dazai's reaction. It takes Dazai a moment to get to his feet and pull off the helmet and then he's... raising his finger in warning.

"Not a word," he says.

"You liked it, didn't you?" Chuuya challenges. "You fucking loved it."

"It was okay."

"It was *amazing."*

"I have to go."

Chuuya lets his head fall back a bit, staring at the stars in the sky, so fucking far away and yet just within his grasp. Part of him has always wondered how far he would reach if he tried.

When he returns his gaze to Dazai, the idiot is already staring at him.

Chuuya arches one brow. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You don't have to tell me that you enjoyed it. I already know. But now you can call *me* when you feel like shit instead of swallowing pills with liquor, all right?"

"Can a veterinarian even be friends with a simple civilian?"

No, probably not.

But leaving Dazai all by himself or dragging him into Chuuya's life could both end up with the same result, except that with this here, Chuuya, at least, has a chance of protecting him — and he'd be careful not to let anyone see them together, to begin with.

He settles on saying, "I'll make an exception for you."

"Should I be honored?" Dazai asks mockingly.

"No, you should be going to bed and getting rest." Chuuya lightly kicks his shin, but his smile is tinted with concern. "And I was serious about calling me. You can, okay?"

After a pause, Dazai nods. "Okay." He steps forward like he's about to hug Chuuya or maybe give him a pat, but in the end, he retreats and just waves before turning around and unlocking the door to his dorm complex.

Chuuya stays until he's sure Dazai's safe inside.

Chapter End Notes

> will every chapter end with chuuya dropping off dazai at his dorm? who knows.
>
> btw, right now i am attempting a "update every 10 days" schedule. i will let you guys know if it's working

Chapter 3: Tactics And Strategy

Chapter Notes

> this has become one of my comfort fics so whenever i feel bad i just dive into it! thank you to everyone who left a nice comment or kudos <3 it's really appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's the next day — seven o'clock in the evening, to be precise. Chuuya has to get to work in one and a half hours, and the most productive thing he's done all day was stare at his phone, like one of those infatuated teenagers in those cheesy dramas that Yumeno watches sometimes who wait for their crush to text back all day.

Except that Chuuya is not waiting for a message from his crush, but from the stranger that somehow wiggled his way into his life and is now refusing to give him any sign whatsoever that he's *okay*. That he's *fine*.

To be fair, it's been less than 24 hours — but considering what happened last time, it's completely valid to be worried, right?

Chuuya gets up from his couch with a curse, throwing the phone halfway across the room before deciding to take matters into his own hands. He will just have to make a bit of a detour on his way to work.

He's pretty used to the route by now, so it doesn't take long until Chuuya spots the ugly brick-red building towering in the distance. He leaves his car in the parking lot of a grocery store around the corner, then heads towards the entrance, passing a few benches on the way and —

Wait.

At second glance, that guy who's sitting on one of said benches with a book in his lap looks familiar.

Chuuya halts for a moment just to admire the pretty view.

Dazai's knees are drawn up, a pen tucked behind his ear as he frowns at the book in his hands. His clothes weren't exactly ugly, per se, the last few times, maybe a bit boring, but Chuuya's especially fond of the white high neck sweater and matching black skirt Dazai's wearing

today.

Not even a moment later, as if sensing his gaze, Dazai looks up. His ridiculously long lashes flutter in surprise. "Hello?"

"Hi," Chuuya says. "Did you lose your phone or something?"

"I think it's out of battery."

"You think?"

Dazai shrugs wordlessly, and Chuuya scrubs a hand across his face.

"Is that why you're here?" he hears Dazai ask. "Because I haven't called you yet?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but today's actually a good day. I didn't have time for a nervous breakdown yet."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. How the fuck do you tell someone you want to help them without actually saying it? "Whatever, idiot. Just charge your fucking phone so I know you're still alive and not lying in a ditch somewhere."

"If Chuuya wants to text me so badly, he should just tell me ~."

Chuuya crosses the distance between them and snags the book out of his fingers. "I'm not asking you to send me selfies and tell me how your day went —" He makes a face. "— though, if you want to do that, then *cool*.

All I want is a fucking sign that you're not sloshed in some stranger's apartment." Because not everyone is as nice as Chuuya — and probably, not as stupid either.

"So what you're saying is that I'm on suicide watch," Dazai says with a tinge of whiskey-bitterness laced in his lazy tone. "Got it."

Chuuya's about to reply when he notices the title of the book that he stole, and his irritated frown promptly melts into a smirk. "A court of thorns and roses, huh?" He lets it dangle between his fingers as he shoots Dazai a look. "Look, who's reading the fae smut now?"

Dazai snatches the book back with a little huff. Chuuya lets him. "Stop distracting me. She's under the mountain right now."

Chuuya would threaten to spoil him, but since Dazai attempted to do that once with this same exact book series, he must have already read it once. So instead of saying anything, Chuuya sits down on the bench, spreading his arms behind him as he closes his eyes and lets the last rays of the sun warm his face.

Dazai reads, occasionally telling him about what's happening. Chuuya listens.

This, he thinks, *is pretty nice.*

"Nakahara-san! P-please be careful—" Higuchi's voice trails off into a shriek as Chuuya does the opposite of being careful and breaks open the door with his foot before sticking his head in.

It's eerily quiet inside the basement — supposedly housing one of the punks that has been selling dirty shit in port mafia territory lately.

With a wordless nod, Chuuya signals for Akutagawa and Higuchi to cover for him as he checks out all three of the rooms and, unsurprisingly, finds them empty. Whether they got their information too late, or whether it was merely a baseless rumor; it doesn't matter anymore because no one is here.

"You know," he hears Akutagawa say behind him, "for someone who always tells me not to rush in head-first, you like to do the opposite."

Chuuya clicks his tongue. "That's why you have to do as I *say*, not as I *do*."

"I'm not your subordinate anymore."

"Oi, don't blow your own horn just because they gave you your own puppies to lead." Chuuya smacks the back of the brat's head as he heads for the stairs. "I'll never stop being your *beloved* mentor."

"You mean *annoying*," Akutagawa corrects him in a grumble, but Chuuya chooses to ignore that comment in favor of checking his messages.

The last few weeks have kept him busy, so he's had to rely on texts and phone calls to talk to Dazai. As it is, he has two unread messages from the walking beanpole, but this time it's not a stupid meme, or a picture of the latest book he's reading, or a vexing question about how the animals at Chuuya's job as a "vet" are fairing. No, the texts are

much more straightforward.

An "*SOS*" and an address.

Fuck.

Did someone discover a connection between the two of them?

Did Dazai do something stupid again?

Did —

There's no time to think about any of that. An *SOS* could mean anything, and Chuuya's not going to take any chances.

"Change of plans," he barks out to Akutagawa and Higuchi and climbs into the passenger seat of the car waiting for him on the side of the road. The driver, Shimizu, doesn't bat an eyelash when Chuuya rattles off the address — thankfully, only five minutes max from their current location — and tells him to floor it like there's no tomorrow as Akutagawa and Higuchi hurry to climb inside after him.

Working in the mafia, they're all used to having to do things quickly and efficiently.

"Do we have another lead, Nakahara-san?" Higuchi asks from the backseat as the car flies across the pavement.

Chuuya worries his lip, weighing his options here.

He knows that if it comes down to it, these two will be able to keep their mouth shut. Akutagawa might not like to say the words out loud, but it was Chuuya who picked him off the streets and gave him a purpose. It was Chuuya who helped him to control the beast called Rashomon.

Akutagawa wouldn't dishonor that invisible bond. And Chuuya doesn't need to worry about Higuchi. She'd walk face-first into a fire if her senpai asked her to.

Then again, Chuuya would prefer to keep the number of people knowing about Dazai as low as possible.

In the end, however, having back up in his corner — just in case — trumps anything else. Chuuya will deal with the consequences later.

"It's a different matter," Chuuya finally replies, watching their faces in

the rear-view mirror. "I'll need you two to keep quiet about it. Got it?"

Akutagawa barely even reacts as he says, "Yes, Chuuya-san."

Good boy.

"Shimizu," Chuuya shoots him a look, "you too."

"I didn't hear a thing, boss."

Wonderful. Most of the time, it pays off to remember his subordinates' names and treat them like living human beings instead of expandable guard dogs.

The closer they get to their destination, though, the faster Chuuya's blood pulses with fear of the unknown. It's not an easy feeling to ignite in him after half a life on the streets and the other half in the mafia, but Dazai has this unique talent of shaking his carefully-built resolve.

Shimizu stops in a side street. The address Dazai sent him is in the middle of an indie shopping area, too crowded and too full of innocent civilians for a car to be of any use.

"Stay hidden until I give the command," Chuuya instructs, car door swinging open. "Be ready for combat."

"Any people to look out for, Nakahara-san?" Higuchi asks.

"Still unknown. I'll tell you as soon as I know more."

Chuuya hops out and worms his way through swarms of oblivious people as he tries to call Dazai, and *again* only gets his damn voicemail.

Nothing looks out of the ordinary. No shouting. No screaming. No suspiciously dressed people. No sound of shotguns firing. But Chuuya's not so easily fooled, and every single one of his instincts stays alert as he gets closer and closer. His brows furrow as he sees that the address leads inside a clothing store.

He enters it, heart pounding in his ears, and then —

"Oh, good. You're here."

Chuuya spins around, only to see Dazai grinning at him, wearing a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses. A *safe and uninjured* Dazai. "Which

pair do you think suits me better?"

He switches to a pair with small, round glasses, ones that make him look like a hippie — which is beside the point because Dazai is *completely, utterly fine* —

"This one? Ah, you're right. The other one."

"What the *fuck*, Dazai?!"

Dazai makes a face. "So not the other one?

"You fucking sent me an *SOS* for *this*?" Chuuya snaps.

"Well, I wasn't sure which ones to pick," Dazai says like it's self-explanatory, "and I don't own a penthouse and twenty other estates in the country. I can only afford one pair."

The audacity of this little bitch —

"Chuuya-san," Akutagawa's voice comes from the earpiece, cutting off what was about to become the longest string of insults known to mankind, "we're outside the shop. Do you need us?"

Chuuya lets out a sigh, all the tension bleeding out with it before he replies. "Stand down."

"Got it."

He turns his gaze back to the bastard named Dazai, but there's this strange glint in his eyes as he tilts his head and steps forward, *this* close to breaching Chuuya's personal space. "Veterinarians have earpieces now? How curious."

And it's at this moment that Chuuya realizes *fuck*. Dazai did it.

The bastard outmaneuvered Chuuya.

"Don't think that this is some kind of shitty victory." Chuuya stabs a finger in his chest, delighting in the silent tremor that runs through the mackerel's breath. "Do you even know how serious an *SOS* is?"

"Yes," Dazai drawls, "that's precisely why I did it."

"I will strangle you —"

"Is that what you guys do?" Dazai asks and then mouths, "in the

mafia?"

Chuuya's hands itch with the desire to fist in the idiot's collar and rip him a new one, *but.* They're in public. And Chuuya has his emotions under control. He does.

Dazai grins, satisfied. "So now that you're here, you can still help me out, yes? The heart-shaped ones, or the Ozzy Osbourne glasses?"

"Heart-shaped," Chuuya mutters as he turns to inspect the other options. "You look stupid in the other ones."

"That's rude. Maybe *you* should wear the shades and, you know, see the world through rose-tinted glasses and all."

"Ha, ha, you're so funny."

"One of the many good qualities I possess."

Chuuya sends Akutagawa a text instead of using his earpiece, adamant about keeping Dazai as far away as humanly possible from that side of his life even if the bastard would leap over with his arms spread if given a choice.

"Are you free for the rest of the day?"

Chuuya side-eyes him. "More or less."

"Want to watch a movie with me?"

"I'm not watching *the human centipede* with you again," he says, his facial muscles twitching in disgust at the mere memory.

"I will pick a better movie this time," Dazai tells him. "I swear on my parents, chibi!"

On parents, he has not lost one single word about before? Yeah, fat chance. Those either don't exist, or Dazai dislikes them enough to swear on them just to annoy Chuuya with a shitty film.

Chuuya shoots him a look. "*I* pick. And we're watching one at my place. Your room gives me a headache."

It's funny. A month ago, Chuuya wanted nothing more than to have this weird, cryptic college student out of his apartment. Now said college student is opening shelves and drawers in his kitchen as if he

owns the damn place.

And Chuuya doesn't even mind it.

"What are you looking for?" he asks after Dazai closes the twentieth cupboard with a resolute slam this time, a tiny pout starting to grow on his lips.

"Your *sugar,*" Dazai huffs and shoots Chuuya a glare as if *he* specifically hid it from him just to annoy him. *Huh.* Who knew that's all it takes to rile him up. "I can't eat *neutral* popcorn. It has to be *sweet."*

Leaning against his island with his phone in his hand, Chuuya wordlessly points his index finger at the exhaust hood, a box of sugar standing on top of it. His smirk is loud enough to replace any needed words.

"Why would you place it there?" Dazai grabs the sugar and pours a generous amount into the bowl of popcorn. "Where can no one find it?"

"I'm sorry for not consulting your highness before decorating *my* kitchen." Chuuya doesn't look up as he continues to read the latest messages from his subordinates. *Supply stolen. A member missing her phone. A contract needs to be signed.* Translation: tomorrow will be a long day.

"Chuuya could have told me instead of letting me look for twenty minutes!"

With a sigh, Chuuya pockets his phone and crosses his arms. "*Some* of us have a job."

"Uh-uh, *accounting*," Dazai retorts, and, as per usual, doesn't get an answer. "It escapes me why you *still* insist on pretending like we both don't know that you're one of the men in black."

"No comment," is all Chuuya says. It might seem silly, but he has to assume the worst-case scenario — he was trained to do that the moment he joined the mafia. So that if Dazai ever gets caught in the crossfire — and Chuuya will give his damn best to make sure that *never* happens — Dazai will have no factual information regarding Chuuya's involvement with the mafia. All Dazai will have is the blurry answer right now. That's it. The microwave is still working diligently, loud *pops* echoing through the room every few seconds. Chuuya nods

towards the living room. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll go change."

In his bedroom, Chuuya takes his time unbuttoning his vest, then slipping out of the chest harness. He only realizes what that odd feeling on his face is when he walks past his mirror and stops. He's... *smiling*.

Now don't get him wrong: Chuuya's content with his life. He can shower in money; he has a job that he likes; co-workers that are decent people, and everything else one would need to be happy. He fucks. Sometimes he allows himself a date here and there. He goes out to drink with Tachihara.

But... he's never had quite something like *this*.

Someone waiting for him in the living room so they can lie down and watch a movie together. It's such a small matter in the grand scheme of things, yet it means more than Chuuya thought it would.

It's not like they're together or anything. *God no.* That would be catastrophic, to say the least. It doesn't mean that he can't enjoy it, though.

When Chuuya emerges, wearing only his button-up and pants, Dazai's already sitting on the couch, a ginormous bowl of popcorn waiting in his lap. "Finally," he grumbles, "so what do you want to watch?"

Chuuya flops down next to him. "*28 days later?"*

"God no," Dazai replies with a scowl. "Zombie movies suck."

"Zombie movies are *fun*," Chuuya corrects and reaches over to grab some popcorn although Dazai holds the bowl away from him as if protecting a newborn babe from the big, bad wolf.

"Only if you have no taste. No popcorn before the movie has even started."

Chuuya looks him dead in the eye as he takes a handful anyway, shoving it into his mouth.

"This is an act of *war*," Dazai announces.

"Give it your best shot," Chuuya retorts. "I know which one of us has been to the gym every day for the last few years, and it's not you."

"And this is why you will fail. Wars aren't won with brute strength."

Dazai points at his head. "*This* is what wins them."

Chuuya raises one brow. "Literature analyses? Being an obnoxious brat?"

Dazai scowls.

Cute.

"*Tactics* and *strategy*."

"Well, go on then," Chuuya challenges, taking another fistful of popcorn and delighting in the way it makes Dazai's eyes twitch. "Use your precious brain to make me stop eating. What are you waiting for, huh?"

"For you to get hit by lightning and die," Dazai huffs and turns away to cross his arms across his chest. "I wonder. Does the mafia know that they have the most annoying midget in all of history working in their employment list?"

"Does your college know that you get regularly drunk and break into stranger's homes just to feel something?" No reply. Yeah, that's what Chuuya thought. "C'mon, pick a movie. We don't have all day."

Dazai begrudgingly picks up the remote and starts scrolling through the array of options, dismissing every single one without so much as a glance. "We don't? What, have a mission later? Some stores to rob? Some people to kill?"

"No, but I do try to keep somewhat of a consistent sleep schedule, and considering you're not even stopping to look at the title, we'll be here for a while."

"I already know all the titles."

"Okay, you know what —" Chuuya braces himself with one hand on the couch to reach over and steal the remote — or *wrestle it* from Dazai when the lanky bastard stretches out his stupid, long arm to keep it away from him. Chuuya's not against cheating, though, so all it takes is one little pinch of his thigh and Dazai's screeching. "I said I'm gonna pick, so I'm gonna pick because I'm not about to sit here and wait ten years. *There.* We're watching *Iron man.*"

"Marvel movies?" Dazai looks like someone just farted in front of his face. "Really, Chuuya?"

"What do you have against them? They're fun."

"They're only military propaganda for the US." Dazai shrugs. "Not to mention, incredibly *nonsensical* and *boring*."

"You and Tony aren't that much different, you know. You both loooove to hear yourselves talk."

As the famous marvel logo appears on the screen, Dazai's face screams *offended*, and Chuuya can't help but laugh, loud and clear, his chest lighter than it has been in months.

It's been a while ever since Chuuya allowed himself to sit down for several hours and watch a movie; his fingers keep reaching for his phone as if it will ring any minute now and tell him to get his ass back up and to the headquarters. He did leave clear instructions for his teams. His subordinates can be clumsy sometimes, stubborn and short-sighted, but they are capable of following orders — Chuuya makes sure to teach them when taking people under his wing — so it should be all right.

Dazai, as expected, doesn't give up without a fight. He makes sure to let Chuuya know *exactly* what he thinks of the movie by providing a running commentary on every little detail that no one asked for. Chuuya doesn't mind it, though. Dazai's muffled voice is surprisingly soothing.

So soothing that Chuuya, at some point, feels his eyelids grow heavy, lulled by Dazai offering a "this doesn't even make any sense!" He probably should get up and run a lap, down a shot of espresso, because he planned to drive Dazai home afterwards, but he can't stop himself from sinking into that syrupy-sweet, drowsy sleep even if he wanted to, so when darkness falls over him, Chuuya lets it.

When he wakes up, it's because of a loud, terrible snore coming from someone. Chuuya's eyes snap open in the darkness, the noise stops, and he realizes that it was his own damn self.

Then he realizes several more things.

There is something warm clinging to his arm. Chuuya's head is lying on something hard and hairy. His neck fucking hurts. And... and there's an odd feeling of peacefulness floating through his mind, fuzzy and delicate like pink clouds on a warm summer evening.

It's not *that* unfamiliar of a position. Chuuya has had dates that ended up like this. Except this isn't a *date.* This is the stray college student that only hangs out with him because he's bored. (*A civilian.*) (*A liability*.) Dazai, who flinches away from every physical touch as if the skin he's hiding under all his layers, is too sensitive to experience it. And now, when Chuuya so much as attempts to sit up, stretch his back, Dazai buries himself closer, a stubborn little shit even in his sleep.

So, just for a moment or two while the haze of the impromptu nap clears away in his head, Chuuya stays like this. He only moves his head a little, trying to avoid any kinks, and gets a mouthful of Dazai's unkempt hair. It tickles. It smells good. Like a crisp winter air, vanilla, and burning sake that runs down one's throat. A content sigh slips out of Dazai, chest falling heavily against Chuuya.

Cute.

It's all Chuuya can think of whenever he's with Dazai. All Chuuya allows himself to think of in terms of a feelings scale from *I'm indifferent to this guy* to *I would burn down a city for him.* There can't be anything more than *cute.* Not with Chuuya's involvement in a crime syndicate. Not when port mafia's enemies would love to get their hands on something as precious and innocent as Dazai. Not when a man like Chuuya could never have a normal relationship without endangering his partner.

He used to think it's fucking unfair. Now he's used to it.

So Chuuya only lets himself linger for a few more moments before wrestling out Dazai's octopus grip, absently making a mental note in the back of his head that Dazai's not as weak as he looks.

Chuuya considers sleeping here and giving Dazai his bed, but he didn't buy this expensive ass couch only to not let his guests crash on it. It's comfortable — ten times more so than the futon in Dazai's room. It will do. Chuuya grabs one of the fluffiest, warmest blankets and drapes it over Dazai's sleeping form. Then he slips away into his room and his own bed.

And if he starts missing how warm and cozy he felt all wrapped up in Dazai, Chuuya ignores it.

There's one thing that the mafia taught him best, and it's this: shoving away your emotions to see the clear picture. Chuuya's a *pro* at that.

Chapter End Notes

is chuuya a liar or is he just stupid? find out more in chapter 4

Chapter 4: Murphy's Law

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is this saying: *anything that can go wrong will go wrong.* It's called *Murphy's Law*. Many pessimists in the mafia, including Akutagawa, rely on it to plan missions and assignments, allowing for any mistake and detour, no matter how small, so that they have a few thousand backup plans to fall back on in case something goes wrong.

Personally, Chuuya's not a fan of that law. The idea of living life by planning a million steps ahead is maddening, and considering that his life wasn't all too kind to him in the first place, gritting his fangs and blindly hoping that there is something better, something *right* out there was the only way to survive in the gutters without losing his mind.

Obviously, sometimes things can and will go wrong anyway — Chuuya's not saying that never happens. He simply prefers to deal with those bridges as he gets to them. Because if you can't do that? Then the mafia is probably not the right workplace for you.

So whenever Akutagawa repeats that stupid saying as if his life depends on it, Chuuya smacks him on the head.

Today, though, *Murphy's Law* smacks *Chuuya* on the head.

"Who is the boy you've been hiding from me, lad?"

He almost chokes on his coffee, desperately slapping his chest as his brain tries to come up with an appropriate answer to this line of questioning. "Um, I'm sorry *what*?"

"Oh, don't give me these doe eyes." Kouyou smacks him on the back of his head. (Yes, he was being literal about that.) "You know exactly what I mean!"

Smothering his expression, Chuuya shakes his head. "Nope. No idea."

"A young man. Tall. Brown hair. Bandages. You were seen downtown, leaving a shop near the city university, even leaving your apartment. Once is a coincidence but three times? Are you dating him?"

"I'm not dating *anyone*," Chuuya snaps as he walks out of the mini-kitchen that's attached to the boardrooms at the mafia's headquarters. "I'm allowed to have friends, am I not?"

Falling into step next to him, Kouyou turns up her nose. "I'm not saying it's forbidden. I would just like to remind you how easy friends can become targets."

And she's speaking from personal experience, Chuuya knows.

"Trust me," he huffs out, scrubbing his free hand over his face. "I'm more than aware of that. I... I thought I was careful."

"In this type of work, you can never be careful enough, lad."

If word has already spread in the mafia, it will only take so long until it accidentally falls into the hands of someone who isn't as nice as Kouyou. Someone who will use a poor college student to get what they want. Or worse, someone who will get wind that the poor college student has a nullification ability and do something far worse than attempt to kill him.

A sigh leaves Chuuya. He knew this would happen eventually, knew that there'd be risks spending so much time with Dazai, but *fuck,* he has grown to enjoy that time. *Sort of*. A lot. It's been a while since he had a friend outside the mafia, and now? Now Chuuya will have to come up with a solution to keep Dazai as far away from anything mafia-related even though Chuuya *is* the mafia.

When they stop in front of the glass elevators, Kouyou shoots him one of her *now spill every single detail* look that she sometimes gives their hostages during interrogations. It's startlingly effective. "*Friend?"*

"Yeah," Chuuya murmurs. He only notices how tightly he's gripping his cup of coffee when his fingertips start burning from the brewing heat. "A friend. We hang out sometimes and watch movies."

"Movies*?"*

"Ane-san, are you just going to repeat everything I say?"

"Forgive me for being skeptical. Movies and hanging out isn't what you usually do."

Translation: having civilian friends you watch movies with isn't what I *taught* you to do.

"Well," Chuuya says over the hum of the elevator doors sliding open, "I do have a personality outside the mafia."

For all the wonderful, life-saving lessons Chuuya learned under her command, Kouyou can be a little short-sighted when it comes to the people she considers hers, even if that means keeping them on such a tight leash that it gets hard to breathe whenever they tug.

"That is not what I meant. All I want is for you not to repeat the same mistakes I made."

"Don't worry, okay? I'll be careful."

"I hope so, lad. I really do."

Lucky for Chuuya, he sees Dazai the very same day as they discussed checking out the new burger shop that opened in the college district, close to Dazai's dorms, which nine out of ten times ends up with Dazai sprawled out on Chuuya's couch, rubbing his belly like a pregnant lady and using his fullness as an excuse to stay the night. And it is, kind of, equal parts terrifying and equal parts concerning that Chuuya has a *statistic* now because he has known Dazai for approximately one and a half months now — of which they spent 95% of their free time together.

Today, though, Chuuya takes the freedom to make a change in plans without Dazai knowing about it, which will surely earn Chuuya an earful. Instead of his Bugatti, he takes the first-ever car he owned: a shabby honda civic that he lovingly calls *Betty*. A little ugly, almost embarrassing compared to his collection at home, but remarkably easy to disregard as some commoner's vehicle instead of the one belonging to a mafia executive. So much that when Chuuya rolls up in front of the dormitory, Dazai spends two entire minutes frowning first at his phone, then at the car before Chuuya eventually opens the passenger seat to shoot him a glare.

"You gonna make me wait any longer, princess, or what?"

The *princess* slips out without Chuuya agreeing to it — not an uncommon occurrence whenever he's around Dazai — even if it's not entirely wrong. The way Dazai regards him as he inspects the car's interior, not moving a muscle to actually climb in, is how Chuuya imagines a princess from 1880 to look down at a carriage that isn't as fancy as the one she was promised.

Someone clearly came to appreciate the fruits of wealth, huh?

"So this isn't a sadistic mafia-opponent that stole Chuuya's car and is currently trying to kidnap me with the tinted windows and all," Dazai says as he, at last, get inside the car and snaps the door shut, "but that still doesn't explain why Chuuya's driving this thing."

Pulling out of the side street, Chuuya rolls his eyes. "Betty's not the prettiest, but she's still more worth than most of the dumpster fires your fellow student in that dorm of yours own."

"How is that supposed to make it any better? Even a painted tricycle would qualify as more worth than the cars of poor college students."

"Touché."

"You missed a turn."

"I didn't."

"I live here," Dazai points out as if that fact is news to them both, "so I think I would know."

Chuuya leans back in his seat and lets his left arm rests against the car window, stifling an amused grin. "We're still getting burgers, just not in Yokohama."

"Oh? So Chuuya is kidnapping me, after all." He says it with the excitement of a grocery store employee that has to tell a customer where they can find the eggs for the hundredth time even though everything is signposted, which either says a lot about Dazai and his relationship with his own life, or Dazai's opinion of Chuuya.

"If I was kidnapping you," Chuuya replies, turning to offer Dazai a bright half-smirk at the red light, "I'd have gagged you so I wouldn't have to hear your annoying voice all the time."

Dazai purses his lips. "Kinky ~"

"You don't know the half of it."

Dazai's face doesn't betray any emotions, but Chuuya involuntarily looks for them anyway, curious despite himself whether Dazai *does* know or, in fact, does not, and *great,* now his thoughts are wandering in the totally wrong direction. *Dazai* and *sex* are a bad combination. Awful. Terrible.

"It's green," Dazai's voice points out airily.

Right.

Smothering a visible cringe, Chuuya steps on the gas. It takes him a few seconds to speak without wincing because of how rough his voice has gotten — damn Dazai for being so — so *Dazai.* "No, the reason why we're going out of town is that I need to talk to you, and I need you to take it seriously. Because it *is* serious."

"Chuuya thinks talking to me outside of Yokohama will make me more serious? You sure have a funny way of thinking ~."

"See, this is exactly what I mean."

"A kidnapper *and* an anti-humorist!"

Most of their conversations go like this. Round and round and round in endless circles until Chuuya eventually snaps and drags both of them to the actual matter.

"Someone saw us together. Several times."

Dazai's laughter fades away, but the light in his eyes stays eerily still like the ember of a cigarette in the thick darkness of the night. "Someone?" is what he eventually asks. "As in someone who wants to make a carpet out of me, or someone from your lovely co-workers?"

"The latter. At least, as far as I know."

"So now you're taking me to another city and leaving me there because it's oh so dangerous?"

His tone, as always, doesn't hold much weight, soft like a feather, drifting in the air between them, but if you listen closely — and Chuuya always doe — droplets of a silent *please don't* are laced into it.

"I wouldn't do that." The car accelerates as they merge onto the highway. "At this point, you're safest by my side."

Dazai makes a surprised noise in the back of his throat and quickly covers it up with another breezy comment. "So why the kidnapping?"

Chuuya huffs out a quiet laugh. "Easier to sit outside and enjoy the sun than in Yokohama. And because I wanted to." His eyes flicker to Dazai tracing wave patterns on the window with his fingers as the car flies over the road. "Have you ever even been to another city?"

"I only moved here after I graduated senior high school."

"Oh. Where'd you live before that?"

"In a tiny village northwest."

"You miss it sometimes?"

That earns him a nasty leer. "Do I look like I miss it?"

"I don't know, Dazai," Chuuya says. "I'm not a mind-reader. Even I miss the gutters sometimes." Even after receiving the most obscene paychecks for the last few years, after bathing in bills and fancy wine and fine clothes, after sleeping in a cozy bed and a stable roof over his head, Chuuya's heart still craves to feel the kind of comfort he only had when he was huddled in a tent with his friends, sharing stolen liquor and making plans to take over the city. It wasn't a perfect or beautiful life, but it *was* life. Ugly and raw and smelling like dirt, dole-ups, and childish dreams.

"The only thing that I miss is the silence."

Dazai stops, and Chuuya, for a few moments in which the only sound is the deep hum of the car, assumes that's it, which is even more than he thought he'd get. Dazai and talking about anything remotely serious? Hard. Dazai and talking seriously about himself? Practically impossible. Not that it makes Chuuya stop trying like the desperate fool that he is, trying to feed the kitten that washed up on his porch. And then —

"If you walked long enough, you would always find a quiet spot in the end. Completely deserted. You can't do that here."

Is that what Dazai's trying to find? Silence?

"There are other ways to find silence," Chuuya says before he can stop himself. His regret only grows when he feels Dazai's eyes on him, drilling interested holes into his skull because, of course, Dazai wouldn't know about this.

"How so?"

"Well," Chuuya twists his neck this way and that, stretching the muscles and pointedly focusing on passing the car in front of them, "meditating, libraries, museums, sex..."

"Someone moaning into my ear does not seem very quiet to me."

Chuuya lets out a soft snort. "Probably because the silence I'm talking about comes afterward when you're so fucked out that —" He stops himself before his words become too damn explicit and slightly horny, clearing his throat. "— that your head's all silent."

"You do realize this is the real world and not one of your gross erotic novels?"

"You literally read my gross erotic novels," Chuuya shoots back, "and you do realize that just because you've never experienced something like that before, it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist, right?"

It stings. Dazai's not going to admit it, but Chuuya can feel the blow deliver with a sharp hiss.

"Oh, forgive me for talking over you sex-god-Chuuya. How dare I!"

"Hey, you asked."

"It's not like different people have completely different experiences and needs."

"Now you're just being dramatic."

"Next time I *dare* have an opinion about sex, I will ask you first before uttering it, Chuuya-sama!"

Chuuya's chest shakes with incredulous laughter. "*Will you stop*?"

Dazai does stop by crossing his arms and gazing out of the window.

Sulking, Chuuya realizes. *Dazai's sulking!* And somehow, it makes even more warmth spread through his chest, through his arms, through his stomach... through every part of his body, really, as if a gentle, melting sun is trying to bleed into his veins.

"I wasn't making fun of you for, y'know, being a virgin or anything. I was j—"

"I am not a virgin," Dazai half-hisses.

"Okay! Good for you. Like I said, I was just trying to make a point."

"Chuuya should stop making points then."

Chuuya deep-heartedly wants to turn the conversation around by telling Dazai how silent and peaceful it is so high above everyone when he's using *For the Tainted Sorrow* to reach for the stars. *How lonely.* But his ability is a well-guarded secret even inside the mafia, and keeping Dazai in the dark about it is not only easier but safer in case someone ever gets their hands on him. Not to mention that if Dazai's right about his *own* ability — Chuuya has never seen him use it so far — Chuuya wouldn't be able to show him that silence anyway.

How ironic. How sad.

They drive in silence for a while until Chuuya cranks up the radio to see whether there's any jam ahead. He knows Dazai's not genuinely mad, that he simply enjoys playing the petulant child from time to time, and considering what he admitted just now, Chuuya grants him that peaceful quietness for the rest of the drive.

He drives them all the way to Chiba, clueless whether it actually has the same burger shop but not all too worried about the outcome. From what he's gathered, Dazai only cares about eating as a social excuse to be together instead of the, you know, eating part. It's not good, obviously, but hey, at least Dazai won't be too disappointed about having to eat from a different brand.

Chuuya does, in fact, find the same shop when he makes Dazai look for it on google maps, and they end up in the drive-through before Chuuya takes them to a little outlook spot over the yoro valley. Dazai grumbles under his breath when he's forced to actually *climb outside*, but Chuuya's pretty sure he finds the view and the scenery just as pretty.

One of the perks of driving a shit car like Betty is that he can hop on the hood and make himself comfortable without having to worry about accidentally leaving dents or scratches.

They only really talk about *it* halfway through their food — burgers, fries, hot wings, and, of course, ice cream.

"So what is Chuuya going to do? Drive us out of town every time for the rest of our days?"

Wiping some sauce off his mouth, Chuuya shrugs. "It's cute that you think we have that long of a future, *but..."* Dazai takes the biggest bite yet, refusing to give him an inch. "... no, that's not an option. Not a permanent one, at least. I was thinking more of something like a bodyguard for you."

Dazai stiffens. Then without even considering it: "No."

"Dazai."

"*No."*

"I'd make sure it'd be someone good. Someone discreet and someone you get along with. It's too dangerous without one."

"I do not want someone to follow me around 24/7. Did you even hear what I said earlier?"

Chuuya sits up on the hood to get a better look at him. "Dazai, if I had a better solution, I'd give you one, but for fuck's sake, you have no idea what the consequences would be if someone targets you and *I'm* not there to save your sorry ass. *None."*

What he doesn't mention is that, technically, there *is* another solution.

There are only a handful of ways of keeping relationships safe when you're part of the underworld. One of them is publically claiming your partner. Shoving them into the spotlight like a *pet* only to show the world what would happen if somebody even dared to lay a finger on them.

But that's not an idea that Chuuya's willing to entertain right now, or ever, so he doesn't bother bringing it up.

"Veterinarians are that ruthless, hm?" Dazai mutters bitterly and dumps his half-eaten burger on their growing pile of trash.

Chuuya still refuses to say the word *mafia* as if clinging to that last shred of ambiguity will keep Dazai out of his world when the truth is that he's already in the middle of it.

"Would you rather have a bodyguard, or would you rather live with the risk that at any point in time, someone could come for you and use you as bait? And trust me, when I say it wouldn't be a quick death. Or an easy one. It would last *days. Weeks. Months.* It would hurt, and the pain would never stop. Because they'd want *me*, and I swore my loyalty to someone else, so I wouldn't come for you."

Dazai's cool gaze shoots to him, and for a second there, Chuuya sees the flicker of hurt before it burns out, locked away somewhere deep and endless; a place where it can ultimately get recycled into Dazai's self-destructive behavior.

Maybe the words are too harsh. Perhaps they aren't even true because, at this point, Chuuya can't imagine hearing that Dazai's in enemy hands and *not* burn down the entire city looking for him but — Dazai has to understand that it's not a joke. The monsters he keeps talking about are real, and they're not as well-rounded as those in fictional novels.

Dazai twists his head away from him, staring at a point in the distance that Chuuya can't follow. "I can learn how to protect myself."

"I'll make sure you do that one way or another, but it's not enough. You need the protection *now."*

Chuuya lets Dazai brood over it for a while as he finishes his food. It doesn't taste as good anymore as it did a few minutes ago when they were still casually discussing whether Nick in *the Great Gatsby* is gay or extremely gay for Gatsby. Once he's done, he hops off the hood and dusts off his pants.

"You can think about it on the ride back home."

Dazai meets his eyes. "I get to meet the person beforehand?"

"Of course."

"And if I don't like them, we'll find another one?"

"Yeah."

"Chuuya's awful," Dazai mumbles, but he gets into the car like someone who just agreed to something they didn't want to agree to. "I wish I would have never gotten drunk that night. My life would be so much easier right now."

As Chuuya fastens his seatbelt, his mouth twitches into a sad, little smile. Yeah, the logical feeling should be to regret how things went all those weeks ago. Chuuya wouldn't be responsible for this life right now. Dazai wouldn't be at risk of getting caught in the bloody crossfire of the mafia. But, for the life of him, Chuuya can't bring himself to feel anything but desperately, devastatingly glad that Dazai wound up in his bed that night.

There are two candidates that Chuuya's eyeing right now.

A tiny number for a city with such a thriving underground world, but

Chuuya has put out feelers to find the *best* — and only the best, and that's what his contacts have given him so far.

"Number one: Tetchou Suehiro. Also, know as *Meteor-Slasher."* Chuuya cringes as the words leave his tongue. Dazai, who's holding the photograph of the young man in his hand, seems to feel the same.

"A vigilante brat all for myself. Chuuya, did Christmas come early?"

"The only brat between the three of us is you. Fuck the name. He's *good.* Tetchou graduated top of his class in the military police and then became part of an official special military division tasked by the government to hunt down and capture powerful ability users when they use their skills for criminal activities. T—"

"So basically, he's your enemy?"

Technically, yes.

Then again —

"The task force was disbanded half a year ago because of internal corruption and fraud. He's been taking odd jobs here and there ever since. My contacts say Tetchou went through, let's say, quite a bit of character development as well as a moral realignment."

"He looks like he will judge me for the books I read."

Chuuya's brows shoot up in amusement. "You know you're describing yourself?"

"Except that he has awful book taste, and mine is *excellent."*

"Whatever you say, Mr.*Twilight deserves an Akutagawa Prize."*

"I mean every word."

"Don't judge a book by its cover," Chuuya reminds him as he steers the car into a side street close to the gym where they're going to meet with Dazai's potential future bodyguard. "And we're going to have to discuss what kind of arrangement we need for you anyway. Most likely than not, he won't be there to bother you when you're reading your books."

"I hope so for you," Dazai huffs, "or I'm going to reconsider this entire thing."

It would be safer to let someone keep watch over Dazai at all times, but even Chuuya knows that the prospect of having no genuine privacy can be daunting, especially to someone like Dazai. Someone who just wants a moment of silence here and there in a city as crowded and as loud as Yokohama.

The car comes to a humming stop, and Chuuya turns to look at Dazai, still stubbornly gazing forward with a jutted lip. C*ute,* Chuuya's brain immediately whispers. (*Bad. Very bad.)* "Keep an open mind, yeah? He's my preferred choice for you right now, but if it doesn't fit, then it doesn't fit, and we'll still have other options."

"Hm. If chibi says so."

"Okay, good. Let's go."

Dazai does *not* keep an open mind.

He walks into the matted training hall, already wearing a scowl, which is fine and well — Chuuya has no right complaining about facial expression when he's the CEO of glaring daggers at people — except that's only the tip of the iceberg. The actual massacre starts as soon as Tetchou pauses his sparring session to greet them, and Dazai opens his fucking mouth.

"Why do you think you're the right guy for this job?"

Chuuya had other introductions in mind — something smoother, less blunt, feeling their way into the dark, but hey, it's Dazai who is going to put up with Tetchou if this interview goes right, so shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants, Chuuya watches the scene unfold.

Tetchou lets his sword spin through the air a few times before sheathing it away, showing an objectively impressive but redundant array of skills. "Because I'm the best at everything I do."

Dazai's face remains painfully unimpressed. "I asked why you'd be right, not to hear the standard line of *I'm the best.* Disappointing."

Tetchou's eyes twitch as he looks at Dazai, then he glances at Chuuya, who keeps watching in curious silence, not willing to move a finger for either side. (Even though if, suppose he had to pick, it would Dazai. Obviously.) "You wouldn't have contacted me if you didn't already know that I'm the best in my field, so I'm not going to stand here and beg you for a job. Actually, *you* should be begging *me*." With

that, he does a flip backward, whipping out his sword and landing in a fighting stance at the same time. "I'm fast, smart, and physically apt. I have excelled in every mission ever given to me. My results are outstanding. And —" He does another dramatic series of summersets, ending up right in front of Dazai with his sword pointed right at his throat. "— whoever it is that you need protection from won't see me coming. Ever."

That little fucker.

"Some advice, shithead —" for all the grand display of talking, Tetchou doesn't see Chuuya coming up behind him either, falling to the ground with a high-pitched yelp when Chuuya kicks the back of his knee. "— don't ever point your weapon at your potential employers."

Tetchou's neck twists and his scowl only deepens when he remains pinned on the ground, *for the tainted sorrow* making Chuuya's foot weigh a hundred more times than it actually does. "I was doing a live demonstration!"

"That's not what Dazai asked you for, though," Chuuya says with a small tut in his voice. Raising his eyes to Dazai, he expects to find an even deeper frown of unimpressed silence on him, perhaps an *I told you so*, but instead, Dazai's eyes are on *him.* On *Chuuya.* And —

Oh.

Curling and uncurling his fingers, Chuuya fights the urge to immediately let go of his ability and end up looking even guiltier than he already is. Well, guilty from the way Dazai's looking at him, at least. Somehow Chuuya managed to keep his ability an unspoken truth the entire time. Now, without even thinking twice about it, he revealed it like some thoughtless teenager showing off something cool to his crush.

(Not that Dazai's his crush.)

(That comparison sucks.)

Tetchou's annoyed grunt breaks through the stream of thoughts in Chuuya's head before the little fucker reaches for his sword. Chuuya has to kick it away with his foot so he won't get stabbed by that elongating thing.

"Oi. What'd I just tell you?!"

"Don't use me as your carpet," Tetchou mutters, jumping to his feet and dusting off his clothes.

"Don't be a dick then."

"As you can see," Tetchou continues as if Chuuya didn't even speak, "I always find a way even against strong abilities like his."

Dazai smiles cooly. "Hm, it sure is important to have someone strong in case of... powers like that. I agree. What's your favorite book then?"

Tetchou places his arms on his hips. "I don't have time for books."

"Beep. Wrong answer. Favorite food?"

"As long as it goes with the same color, I am willing to eat anything."

"Now that's just weird," Dazai says bluntly. "And I can see that you don't particularly like me, so I have to wonder again. Why should I pick you? Is money that important to you?" Being the asshole that he is, Dazai doesn't even let him answer the question. "No, that's not it. You don't look like you care much about that. So what is it?"

For the first time since this awful conversation started, Tetchou takes his time to ponder the question instead of shitting out the first fabricated answer off the top of his head.

Chuuya has an inkling of what that answer will be.

"My personal opinion of you doesn't matter." Predictable. "What matters is whether I can do my job and keep you safe, and I *can* do that."

A purpose.

Tetchou needs a new purpose after the military task force he was in got disbanded, probably the more challenging, the better, and what is more complicated than walking the fine line between the mafia and the mafia's enemies as he tries to protect an innocent bystander like Dazai?

Chuuya knows a thing or two about looking for a purpose, and as much as he *gets* it, he's also aware that Dazai will not. Dazai won't get it, and no matter how much experience and skills Tetchou demonstrates here, he will not be the right fit to keep Dazai safe. Not today.

"C'mon," he says with a nod at Dazai before giving Tetchou a look. "This won't work."

"Your loss," Tetchou says with a shrug, and that's it.

Number one: Tetchou Suehiro.

"I told you this was a bad idea," Dazai is so friendly to point out as they walk past the various gym equipment.

"Don't *I told you so* me," Chuuya mutters, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants. "Tetchou was my first choice for you, but we still have one more to meet. If that one doesn't work out either, I'll think of something." He's met with a cold silence that makes him worry his lip. "What, cat got your tongue? You got nothing to say?"

Outside, Dazai kicks a pebble with his foot, pretending like Chuuya isn't currently trying to speak to him.

"Really mature, Dazai."

"Oh, I'm just trying the Nakahara Chuuya method of staying silent about things that matter."

"It's just an ability," Chuuya says once they're both in the car. Driving while arguing gets him worked up, so he doesn't put the keys into the ignition just yet, patient as he waits for Dazai to come up with the most irritating reply as humanly possible in the seat next to him. "It's not that important."

Dazai crosses his arms and sinks back against the cushions. "Maybe not, but it would have been nice to know. I told you about mine. And don't start going off about how dangerous it is again," Dazai adds before Chuuya can reply with precisely that. "If you insist on having a human cement wall invade my privacy to keep me safe, then the least you could do is trust me enough to tell me about your ability. Unless you don't trust me. Is that it?"

"I do trust you," Chuuya finds himself murmuring after a few moments. "That's not it."

Dazai glares at him. A silent question.

Chuuya's chest falls with a sigh. Lifting his fingers to softly tap the pack of cigarettes in the cupholder, it starts glowing red and cigarettes start floating out of the pack and into the air between them, swirling

around themselves like planet earth. "For as long as I can remember this... ability — this power has been dictating my entire life. Don't get me wrong, it's fancy. It can be fun. I love it, I do. I just — you didn't know about it. Even with my work, I was just a normal guy to you. I guess I wanted to hold onto that for a little longer."

Dazai's answer comes faster than expected.

"Stupid Chuuya," he says, and in a show of unusual gambit, Dazai wraps his fingers around Chuuya's hand. "You're always going to be normal and boring to me."

The cigarettes crash down.

The red glow around Chuuya's body evaporates, leaving him submerged in a pool of cool, deep silence.

He stares at the empty space for a few minutes, Dazai's words echoing through it like a mountain's call. Then Chuuya's eyes slide to their joined hands, and he stares some more. Not only because it was Dazai who, for once, initiated physical contact — although that is something worth mentioning in itself — but because there's this urge deep within his ribcage, trying to break free like a dove in a birdcage, and it's telling him to trace his thumb over Dazai's hands except that would be stepping over an invisible line Chuuya has drawn with neon colors himself and —

Nope.

He's not going to do that.

"Well," he eventually blurts out, withdrawing his arm, so he can search for the car keys, "that's, uh, good to know."

The weight of Dazai's eyes on him, let alone his palpable lack of commentary, press down on Chuuya like the pressure of water, but he swallows it down and shakes it off.

A good ten minutes pass before Dazai finally speaks again. "So who's our next victim?"

Chuuya huffs out a laugh despite himself. "Number two is —"

"— Sakunosuke Oda. Nice to meet you."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left kudos and comments ahhh it means so much to me ;__; I love this fic and I hope y'all will enjoy the rest of this (bumpy) ride <3

Also, you can now find the playlist here!

Chapter 5: Truth or Shot

Chapter Notes

> Updating this kinda late because I've been working on another long-ish one-shot and my other AUs but to make up for it I made this one very long and more importantly very gay
>
> Content warnings:
> - some depression jokes
> - mentions of suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm Sakunosuke Oda. Nice to meet you."

Chuuya's only reply is a curt nod for the time being as he sits down at the little table, leaving most of the talking to Dazai, who glances around the bustling diner before directing his gaze to Sakunosuke. "Why choose a restaurant of all places to meet?"

The guy, tall, with short reddish hair, and light stubble, accepts the question without much of a reaction as he drops a cube of sugar into his coffee. "I like the curry they make." Chuuya feels himself frown. "And discussing things is always better over a bowl of good food."

"And what if I don't like curry?" Dazai questions.

Sakunosuke slides the menu over the table. "I'm sure you'll find something that suits your tastes."

"Fine," Dazai snaps, grabbing the menu as he looks him dead in the eye, "I *will."*

Wow, I can't believe I like this guy, Chuuya thinks, and then immediately afterwards: *wow, I can't believe I just thought that.*

Sakunosuke smiles — not the fake, overzealous kind either, but a small, genuine one. It's not so much that Dazai's animosity flies past his head. It's just that he seems to be okay with it.

Huh.

After ordering himself an iced coffee and a muffin — Dazai demands a 20-pump vanilla, 20-pump hazelnut, whole milk, with a whip and

extra caramel drizzle latte at first, but settles for something simpler when all the hard-looking waitress in uniform does is give him a blank stare — he returns his attention yet again to the man in front of him. Chuuya finds himself strangely curious to see what happens next. Because Dazai's not just a brat throwing a temper tantrum… what he's doing is actually, sort of, genius.

Not that Chuuya will ever say that out loud.

"What's your favorite book?"

"Light and Darkness."

"Never heard of it. Sounds cheesy."

"I can borrow it to you someday. It's a very special series."

"Do you know what I do to books that I like?"

Sakunosuke curiously tilts his head.

"I eat them."

"He does not," Chuuya says.

"Fine, I do not, but I bookmark my favorite lines by ripping out the entire page and keep all of them in one special drawer. What do you think about that *tall guy*?"

Unfortunately, *that* is not a lie. Chuuya saw him do it twice already. (And several more times in his nightmares.)

The waitress comes back again, setting down Dazai's iced coffee and the beer Chuuya ordered.

"Actually," Sakunosuke says softly once she is gone, something invisible passing over his face, "that would explain a question I have been asking myself for years now."

Dazai blinks, glances at Chuuya, who only shrugs, then throws the man an accusing glare. "Okay, how is it that out of the two of us, you are being weirder? Explain."

"It's a long story."

"Okay. You're hired."

Chuuya almost chokes on his beer.

“Because you want to hear the story?” Sakunosuke asks.

“No, because you didn’t flinch even once during the entire interview, which means that you will probably have no issues putting up with me a few times a week either.” Dazai leans forward, narrowing his eyes. “Where do you store all that patience? It’s in the pecs, isn’t it?”

Keeping a straight face, Chuuya yanks him back by his collar before silently asking, “You’re sure about this?”

“Yes,” Dazai insists quietly, “I want *this* one.”

Chuuya has slightly different criteria than *patient, tall and weird,* but he considers Dazai agreeing to a bodyguard at all as a victory in his books. There’s just one tiny thing that he needs to check before sealing the deal.

Another waitress appears next to Oda, handing him a steaming bowl of curry, and that’s the moment Chuuya strikes. He flings the knife lying on their table straight at Sakunosuke’s head. Turned away from them, he won’t see it coming. Chuuya is a good knife-wielder, but with the deadly precision of his ability, it’s a guaranteed fatal shot, *except…*

Sakunosuke lifts his spoon and uses it to dodge the knife, letting it clatter to the ground without even bothering to look at Chuuya.

The waitress’s eyes are huge as she blinks at the three of them.

“Oopsie,” Chuuya offers with a sheepish grin, scratching the back of his neck, “I’m such a clutz sometimes.”

“Thank you so much,” Sakunosuke tells her. “It smells delicious.”

“E-enjoy your meal,” she stammers out before scurrying off.

With a smile, Sakunosuke digs into his food. “Satisfied?”

“Impressed, actually,” Chuuya admits, ignoring the heavy weight of Dazai’s eyes on him. “I heard of abilities like yours but never saw one myself.” Having an ability that lets him see into the future and evade danger makes Sakunosuke not only the perfect bodyguard but also the safest person to be around Dazai. (Not Chuuya.) (And it's fine.) (Excellent even.) “I guess we have a deal then. I’ll prepare all the

necessary paperwork.”

Next to him, Dazai’s beaming, which makes Chuuya go through five stages of confusion in a matter of seconds. “Oh my god, this is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me!”

And that's how Dazai gets a bodyguard.

The weird connection he has made with Sakunosuke from the get-go doesn't make any damn sense to Chuuya but if it makes him sleep easier at night — and knowing that there is a tall, buff guy who has a future-predicting ability protecting Dazai whenever he is out will make him sleep him easier — he's not going to waste his time questioning it.

“And what did she say?”

“That I didn’t even have to bother trying because she would cut him in half himself. I had to step in because I still needed him alive.”

“Wah, Oda, that’s so much more interesting than sitting in an auditorium all day! You know, perhaps I should give up on a bachelor’s degree and try myself in the freelancing world as well.”

“I didn’t hire a bodyguard for you,” Chuuya drawls as he approaches the two men in his corridor with a brimful glass of red wine, “so you would end up on the streets doing dirty work like the rest of us.”

Sakunosuke Oda greets him with a polite nod. “Nakahara-san.”

Dazai’s face, on the other hand, lights up into an impish grin that screams as much trouble as it does amusement. “Then why is Chuuya so insistent on teaching me how to fight, hm? Riddle me that, hatrack!”

Chuuya hides his huff in the glass as he takes a careful sip. How is it that Dazai has known Sakunosuke for less than two weeks, and they’re already buddies who share stories and smiles while Chuuya gets stuck with the insults?

“So you can *protect yourself*,” Chuuya says, leaning against the wall as Dazai visibly struggles to slip out of his boots, “not pick fights for money and end up dead in some piss-stained alley.”

“Like, dead because I was stabbed?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’ve never been stabbed before. I wonder if it’s as romantic as it sounds in books.”

“Oh, I can show you if you’re so desperate to find out.”

Dazai’s brows lift in evident amusement. “So that is a knife, and Chuuya’s not just happy to see me?”

Boner jokes, really?

Chuuya supposes he created that monster himself. With an unimpressed expression, he turns to look at Sanusoke instead — and if there’s a tinge of pink heat on his cheek, he concludes that it must be from the *wine.* “Any trouble?”

There hasn’t been any blowback about Dazai so far. Aside from a few teasing remarks from Kouyou, no questions from high above either, but Chuuya knows that it’s only a matter of time before something happens. No one in the history of the mafia has ever successfully kept a friend of this caliber a secret and got away with it. Sanusoke is a step in the right direction, but there’s only so much he can do. Dazai still insistent on sleeping alone at night, even if that’s the most vulnerable position he can offer their enemies.

Chuuya’s still working on figuring that out.

“Quiet,” the man replies before his eyes flicker between the two of them, waiting for a sign that Chuuya grants him.

“Thanks. Good night.”

“Night, you two.”

“Eh, Oda! Can we go to McDonald’s tomorrow?”

Chuuya supposes his thumbs-up mean *yes*.

The soft click of the door falling shut submerges the two of them in a temporary silence, one that Chuuya very much intends to break as he steers towards Dazai with one goal in mind.

“Hey.”

“… *hi,”* Dazai all but squeaks out when Chuuya’s arms slide around his middle. It’s not a simple task, what with balancing the glass of wine in

his hand, but the struggle is worth it as the initial tension bleeds out of Dazai like ink the longer the hug lasts. “Chuuya does realize he doesn’t have to do this every time, right?”

Chuuya pulls away with a half-lidded smirk. “Have you ever considered the possibility that I simply *want* to do this?”

Yeah.

So worth it.

He’s no sadist — well, most of the time anyway — so he spins on his heels to saunter towards the kitchen, letting his ability take care of the wine glass, granting Dazai the mercy of drowning in blazing heat all by himself. “So, what do you wanna do?”

Behind him, he hears a bewildered, little noise. “What do you mean? You invited me.”

“Really?” Leaning against the island counter, he squints. “I thought you invited yourself.”

Dazai stares back at him in equally befuddled silence.

… this, right here, is proof that Chuuya is once again way too deep in this, considering the two of them slid into such a routine that they don’t know even who invited who over. Maybe no one really did. Dazai shows up here. Chuuya doesn’t try to kick him out anymore. They eat, watch a movie, or play games.

It’s stupid, careless, and dangerous to be so close to a civilian, and yet Chuuya can’t bring himself to stop going down this path anymore because he wasn’t lying when he said that Dazai’s now safest by *his* side — and his bodyguard's. The mafia already knows about him. Someday someone will discover Dazai’s ability. And Chuuya would rather be able to do something when that happens than find out once it's too late.

Dazai’s whiny voice cuts through the whirlwind of thoughts in his head. “Can’t we just get drunk? And I don’t mean drinking your ridiculous wine,” he adds before Chuuya can open his mouth. “I want to not be able to count to ten anymore.”

A little offended, Chuuya scowls at his glass of wine, then back to Dazai. “Any special occasion?”

“Do I need one? You don’t have a reason to drink every day.”

“Because it *tastes good*, not because I want to kill off my brain cells.”

Like a sullen child, Dazai rests his chin on the surface of the kitchen island, giving Chuuya what can only be described as *puppy eyes.* (Or, maybe *kitten eyes.)* (And no, Chuuya’s not going to bother even thinking why it’s the one term that he ultimately always comes back to when it’s about this damn idiot.) “Because I want to. That should be reason enough.”

And damn it all to hell, Chuuya’s weak. “Okay,” he gives in with a soft sigh. “Fine. Let’s get drunk."

“Really?” Dazai asks, shooting up with a wide-eyed, sparkle-filled expression.

“Whatever,” is all Chuuya mutters as he pushes away from the island and heads towards the liquor cabinet in his living room. “But we’ll do it with good liquor, at least.” When Dazai doesn’t immediately follow, Chuuya calls, “are you coming or not?”

“I’m here,” Dazai says — the fastest he has ever walked as far as Chuuya’s aware. “I’m here.”

“So. What flavor are you feeling up to tonight?”

Dazai considers his options — and there are *many* — before he gives Chuuya a sheepish smile. “Can we try all of them?”

Jesus.

“You got a death wish or something? No, wait. Don’t answer that.” Chuuya rubs his temples, already able to *taste* the epic hangover he will be nursing tomorrow. Nothing that a pain killer… or two… won’t be able to fix — or, so he hopes. “Work will be a pain in the ass, but fuck it. We die like…” He searches for another word that isn’t quite as sexist as *men.* “… heroes.”

“Exactly,” Dazai agrees, “we ball.”

Yes… whatever the hell that means.

Dazai grabs the bottles that he finds the prettiest, Chuuya, the ones he knows are worth their place in his home. Together, they arrange a little kingdom of *chaos* on the coffee table in the living room.

Chuuya's first drink is a good bourbon whiskey. Because Dazai is an animal, he starts with a tequila shot.

"Why do you even own three bottles," Dazai questions after setting down his shot glass without so much as a hiss, "if you're so against tequila?"

The memories of that particular time in his life make his face twist into a mild wince. "I got a little over-ambitious with my first ever paycheck and wasted it on a lot of useless shit."

"You know," Dazai says, pouring himself a new shot, "I can't imagine what you were like younger."

"What do you mean?"

"Drinking *actual* alcohol and partying. I've never even heard you mention a friend."

"Says the guy who drinks himself to death *alone* even though he lives in a college dorm," Chuuya rallies with a scoff.

"I'm not alone now, am I?" Dazai's mouth curves into a grin, but his eyes are cold. Lifting the glass, he nudges it towards Chuuya. "Cheers to that, *friend*."

The tone in his voice leaves a bitter taste in Chuuya's mouth.

"This is depressing. Shouldn't we play a drinking game or something?"

"Look who's the college student now ~ but if you insist. Let's call the game *for every stupid thing Chuuya says, I drink*, and oh, would you look at that! We must have already started!" Dazai exclaims theatrically, starting to raise his glass to his mouth *again*.

"Woah, Woah, Woah." Scowling, Chuuya reaches over the table to grab his wrist. "How about you slow down a little, cowboy? Because Yosano will actually throttle me if I wake her up before nine in the morning again."

He feels Dazai struggle against with grip, then when he fails to get out of it, Dazai lets out a loud sigh and rolls his eyes. "*Fine,* have it your way. How about *truth or shot?"*

"I assume it works like it sounds?" Chuuya asks and draws away again to lean back on the floor.

“Oh, wow. He *thinks.”*

“Shut up,” Chuuya mutters. “Fine. You go first.”

“How many people have you killed?”

Chuuya feels himself blink.

“And *I don’t know* doesn’t count,” Dazai adds with a casual shrug like he is not currently talking about Chuuya’s body count — and not the good one either. “You either answer, or you drink.”

It’s silent as Chuuya brings the glass to his lips. Back when he was with the sheep, he could still count the lives he took on two hands, but once he joined the mafia — well, he’s never been that good with numbers. (And that’s still not including what happened when the laboratory blew up. Chuuya tends to avoid thinking about all the people who used to live in the part of Yokohama that has now become Suribachi City.)

“Your turn,” Dazai informs him.

“What’s your favorite color?”

Dazai snorts dryly. “Blue. Chuuya’s concern is sweet but misplaced. I assure you that I can drink you under the table.”

“Yeah, my memories of our first encounter seem to tell otherwise.”

“That was an exception of epic proportions.”

Because Dazai was actually trying to drink himself to death, is what is left unspoken.

“Whatever you say.” Chuuya nods at him, signaling his turn to ask a question. “Shoot your shot.”

“How did you become a… *veterinarian?”*

Chuuya can’t help but feel oddly proud as Dazai continues their little game of never really saying the actual word. Well, Dazai used to be adamant about getting him to admit it, but that’s all the more reason to feel proud. “It was either join them or let them kill the members of the group I was with before them.”

“What group?”

“Nuh-uh, be a good boy and wait your turn.”

Dazai’s pupils widen ever so slightly, though he makes sure to mask it with a look of indifference as he taps his fingers against his glass with a nonchalant hum.

“What was your first kiss like?” Chuuya’s head tips sideways when Dazai effortlessly throws back the shot without as much as a hiss. “Really? That bad?”

“I was just thirsty.”

"Sure."

“What group?” Dazai immediately asks.

“We called ourselves *the sheep*. They were the ones who… well, who found me when I was a kid.”

A curious look passes over Dazai face, and it looks like he wants to follow up with another question, although he must remember the rules just in time.

“Okay,” Chuuya says and frowns at the ceiling above him as he tries to come up with another question. “If you could only take one person to a deserted island, who would it be?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“A normal question, asshole.”

“But why would you care about that?”

With a puzzled frown, Chuuya shrugs. “I don’t know. Does it matter? Answer it or drink up.”

Dazai drinks.

Then he asks, “These sheep you mentioned — what a pretentious name, by the way — what do you mean *they found you*?”

It’s Chuuya’s turn to drink. He isn’t opposed to sharing these details with Dazai — it’s not that — he just generally doesn’t like to think about it, especially after what happened to the flags.

Dazai’s lips press into a thin line, but he doesn’t comment on it.

“What did you want to be as a child?”

“Ehhh, Chuuya’s questions are so boring!”

Chuuya lets out a huff. “Maybe I’m just curious.” And as fun as it would be to poke around Dazai’s vanilla sex life, it would also turn the idiot next to him into a petulant child. Unlike what some people assume, Chuuya is a considerate person. “You’re so dramatic,” he murmurs when Dazai throws back another drink.

(Dramatic, he might be, but he probably wasn’t lying when he said he could handle his liquor. It’s been how many drinks now? Chuuya can definitely feel them rush through his blood already, but Dazai’s stone-faced as if he’s been shotting water all this time.)

“Do you…” Dazai’s lashes flutter against his marble skin. “... consider yourself to be a kinky person?”

Oh, okay.

“Yeah,” Chuuya replies. “It obviously depends on what my partner and I agree on, but generally speaking, yeah.” And then, because a man can only have so much willpower and decency inside him: “Do *you* consider yourself to be one?”

As if having expected that question, Dazai leans forward ever so slightly, his gaze dead-set on Chuuya and lifts the cup to his lips, plump and glossy, before lazily letting the liquor — whiskey, this time — run down his throat.

Chuuya feels his brain disintegrate a little. Is he already that drunk or is Dazai — Dazai Osamu, the pitiful literature student that somehow crawled his way into Chuuya’s life — trying to *flirt* with him?

“My turn,” Dazai all but purs softly, “what’s your *worst* kink?"

“Don't have any. I wouldn't have them otherwise,” Chuuya replies before he can stop himself. “Why are you so interested all of a sudden, huh? I’m pretty sure you were insulted by this topic last week.”

Dazai’s mouth curves into a dizzying smile. “Maybe I’m just curious.”

That bastard; he’s stealing his line!

“So, what —”

“Oi, wait for your damn turn!”

“You just asked me a question,” Dazai replies airily and juts out his chin. “*As I was saying,* out of any person in this room, who would you sleep with?”

“Wow, Dazai.”

“You’re not going to answer?”

“You know, if you wanted to hear that, I would sleep with you because you are physically attractive despite being the most annoying person alive,” Chuuya flashes him a smirk, “you could have just asked.”

“I do remember Chuuya saying that he wasn’t hitting on me.”

Chuuya squints, failing to see the connection. “So?”

“So were you lying or —”

“I wasn’t. That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t fuck you.”

“Ah. Okay. Okay. Okay.” Dazai nods. “Cool.”

Cool? Chuuya wants to dive deeper into the topic, but — no, that’d be treading dangerous waters. As fun as it is discussing fucking Dazai — although not as fun as *imagining it* — and nope. No.

Chuuya shakes his head, trying to clear his thoughts. “I have to pee,” he announces. Yep, that sounds about right. And safe. Safer.

Dazai uses that as an opportunity to pour himself another shot. “Good luck.”

Chuuya leaves with a soft huff.

The trip to the bathroom takes some maneuvering and a pep-talk in front of the mirror because Chuuya is pretty drunk and he has a lot of thoughts about it.

The first thing he sees when he comes back is Dazai.

Dazai who is casually scrolling through his laptop as he slurps his drink with a *straw*.

“Oi,” Chuuya snaps, “what do you think you’re doing?”

"You were gone for so long that I got bored."

“It’s not my fault the tiles were spinning. And *you.* Snooping much?”

“That was the goal, yes, but there’s not much to snoop, Chuuya. For someone who has a job, body, and face like that,” he waves a hand over him, “you’re really boring, you know.”

Poking Dazai in his bony back, Chuuya huffs, “How’d you even get into it?!”

“Hacking is a lot like lockpicking,” Dazai replies and elbows him back. “Why is most of your search history online shopping sites?”

“Because I like buying things?”

That makes Dazai look at him, long and slow, before a tiny, devious smile appears on his face. “You do, huh?”

“Yes,” Chuuya says warily. “Who doesn’t?”

“Poor, depressed college students… who can’t afford indulgent shopping sprees even though it would help them a lot…”

Chuuya narrows his eyes as he hovers above Dazai, desperately doing human-math in his head. “You want new clothes?”

“Have you ever heard of retail therapy, Chuuya?”

“Obviously. I’m not a caveman.”

“Well, recent studies have shown that online shopping can improve someone’s mental health up to seventeen percent! Isn’t that just fascinating?”

“Really?”

“No, I told you the first bullshit sentence that came to my mind,” Dazai replies, but the moment Chuuya opens his mouth to curse him out, he folds his hands together and bats his eyes at him. “But have I mentioned I’m depressed? Like *awfully, deeply I-haven’t-felt-anything-in-years-depressed?”*

Christ.

“*Fine,”* Chuuya sighs and gestures at the laptop. “Go fucking crazy.”

“Who needs therapy when you have Nakahara Chuuya in your life?” Dazai sing-songs grabbing the laptop and heading towards the couch.

“As thanks for your generosity, I will even allow you to help me pick out the clothes.”

“I need a bigger drink than this,” he mutters as he pours a generous amount of whiskey into his glass.

They end up sitting together, Dazai’s awfully long feet propped up on the coffee table and Chuuya by his side, sipping his drink and looking over his shoulder to comment here and there as Dazai scrolls through site after site.

“On a scale of one to me-the-night-we-met, how drunk are you?” Dazai asks at some point.

“A decent seven.”

“Chuuya is a lightweight, isn’t he?”

“Why,” Chuuya says, ignoring that comment, “you asking?”

“Because I need drunk Chuuya’s opinion. And for him not to remember this conversation.”

“Seven,” Chuuya repeats again, and as if on cue, he hiccups loudly. “See?”

Dazai seems to consider that for a moment before nodding. “Fine. What are your thoughts on… skirts? Or dresses? You know. That sorta thing. The usual.” He shrugs. “Nothing worth remembering tomorrow or bringing up afterwards. Ever.”

“You looked pretty in that skirt,” Chuuya replies before really thinking about it.

“Right. You know, you caught me by surprise that one time. What kind of sociopath doesn’t even text before showing up at your dorm? A guy needs time to mentally prepare *and* plan an outfit—”

Chuuya cuts him off with a hand over his mouth — warm. So warm and…. mouthy. “’s a lot of words, Dazai. Please, slow down.”

“Rmwoaf yoah hmwa —” Chuuya yelps and yanks his arm away when something *wet* touches his hand, and, yep, that was definitely Dazai’s tongue licking him. “Thank you,” Dazai says as if he didn’t just slobber all over him like a damn dog. “Sooo… skirts. You didn’t think it was weird that I was wearing one?”

“I think everything you do is fuckin’ weird.” Chuuya props himself up on the back of his couch with one elbow to give this very important conversation — that he will hopefully remember — his full attention. Funnily, it puts him right into Dazai’s space. What’s even funnier is that Dazai doesn’t shy away like a wild animal this time. The wide, glassy look on his eyes even lingers on Chuuya, on his nose and his mouth, for a moment before flickering up. “You wearing a skirt was one of the most normal — and,” Chuuya holds up one finger, “most stylish choices you’ve made so far.”

Dazai bites his lip. “I am 99% sure the people in my dorm think it’s weird.”

“You’re sure it’s the skirts and not the bandages?”

“Yeah. That too, probably,” he murmurs.

And… shit.

Now Chuuya feels terrible, which is why he ends up booping Dazai’s nose because that always helps, right? Plus, his nose is very boopable.

“Clothes have no gender,” Chuuya says, raising his chin, “and neither do bandages, and you look pretty in both of them, and —” he feels himself lean closer to whisper conspiratively, “you wanna know a secret that’s not really a secret, but we’re gonna pretend it is for the sake of this conversation?”

Dazai raises his brows. “You wear bandages under your shirt?”

“Nope, but I sometimes wear a skirt in bed.” And because that marble blush on Dazai’s cheekbones is so enthralling, he puts out one more. “I like it when my partner claws at it when I fuck them.”

Dazai presses his eyes closed. “I am so drunk.”

“Yeah,” Chuuya nods enthusiastically, “me too.”

And maybe Dazai leans back against Chuuya’s arms when he returns to the task of handpicking out pretty clothes, and maybe Chuuya is hyper-aware of every spot where their bodies press together, and maybe they both had one drink too many, and maybe Chuuya doesn't know where he's going with this.

Dazai wants *a lot of things.* Thankfully, Chuuya’s enthusiasm to buy him all of it even bigger the sum in all of his bank and saving accounts

combined.

They top off their shopping spree by ordering take-out. Chuuya's utterly sloshed but still somewhat lucid enough to notice that Dazai's eyes nearly go cross-eyed with effort when he tries to sit up on his own — and there is nothing quite as sobering as seeing someone else even drunker than yourself.

Chuuya forces him to chug several glasses of water, almost gets slapped in the face for it, then he performs a little makeshift theatre play with pillows and his ability until eventually someone rings his doorbell, and finally, *food.*

He's in the process of deciding how much to tip the delivery guy when he hears Dazai's cheery voice trill, "this is the phone of the great and dangerous Nakahara Chibi. How can I help you?" somewhere in the apartment.

And huh, that's funny. Chuuya's phone is in his pock—

Wait.

"Oh fuck," he mutters and ends up slapping a few hundred bills into the guy's outstretched hand, snatching the various bags of food before power-walking to the living room where Dazai's spread out on the couch like *Rose* from *Titanic* in that famous painting scene. "Dazai!"

Dazai, however, doesn't even deign a look at him, enthusiastically nodding into the speaker. "Mmm, yes, of course, of course, but I'm afraid I can't do that. Why, you ask? Well, it's compli—" His fucking speech comes to a halt when Chuuya's fingers wrap around his wrist, starting to tug, except for once in his damn fishy life, Dazai actually shows a sign of muscle strength. He shoots Chuuya and unbothered glance before letting out a deep hum. "It's *complicated* because he's currently taking a bath. With bubbles and a bottle of champagne. Because that's how pretentious he i—"

"That is not true," Chuuya exclaims into the speaker when he finally gets a hold of it, "although I do like bubble baths with champagne." His mouth parts when his brain lights up with an extraordinary idea. "What if I just poured champagne into my tub and bathe in it? I could just lie back and drink it…"

The sound of someone clearing their throat makes Chuuya pause and remember that this is his work phone. Riiiiight. He holds the phone away for a moment, checking the name, then slaps it back to his ear.

"*Anyways*. What'd you want, Akutagawa?"

"I wanted to ask you for advice regarding my new mission, but if you are busy —"

"What mission?"

"The weretiger one?"

"Ah, right. That one. I'm not busy." Next to him, Dazai *pouts,* and Chuuya sighs. "Okay, maybe I am busy," he admits, only slurring ever so slightly. "Can it wait 'til tomorrow?"

"Yes, it can."

"Good. Meet me —" Chuuya frowns at his phone when the line goes dead without much ado. "That little punk! Not even a proper *goodbye* or a *thank you Chuuya for being such a great, considerate mentor."*

"Aww, is Chuuya getting disrespected by his —" A yawn cuts Dazai short. "— underlings?"

"I'll show you disrespect, you little piece of shit," Chuuya grumbles. "And don't involve yourself more into my work than necessary. I told you. It's —"

"Dangerous, yes, yes," Dazai finishes for him and then places his head in Chuuya's lap, eyes fluttering shut as he makes himself comfortable. "Who cares. I have Oda now to protect me."

"*Why do you like him so much*?" Chuuya ends up blurting. He told himself to leave it alone and not look a gift horse in the mouth, but — Dazai's all but lying on his crotch right now, not really shy or careful about it either, and the lines are a little blurred right now, okay?!

"He's a big, buff man," Dazai murmurs. "What's not to like about him?"

Chuuya's mouth opens and closes like a fish's. "He *is* big and buff. And handsome."

"Tits for days."

"Since when did you get so — so handsy —" He pokes Dazai's forehead. "— and bold?"

"It's called character development. You'd know if you ever picked up a

decent book to read.” Chuuya wants to counter with an insult, but Dazai places a hand over his own mouth and lets out a low, pained groan. “I feel like the world is a carousel, and I am the child that snuck in unbelted.”

“You don’t wear belts on a carousel.”

“Never been on one.”

“Oh, guess I gotta take you on one someday."

If possible, Dazai makes himself even heavier, and Chuuya has to force himself to think of dead bodies, wrinkly butts, and public toilets to avoid focusing on the pressure it puts on his dick. “One of those where I can ride something?”

That’s not just Chuuya’s brain, right?

Right?

“If you wanna ride something so bad, we can go one step further than the carousel.”

As soon as the sentence leaves Chuuya’s mouth, a frown replaces his smug smirk because that came out sounding even dirtier than what Dazai said.

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that?”

“The equestrian club that we own.”

"Oh." Dazai sighs loudly. “I hope I fall asleep and never wake up again.”

Looking down at the guy in his lap, he’s suddenly stuck with this downpour of liquid sunshine inside him. Or maybe he’s been lying to himself because there is no way he has ever gazed at Dazai and not felt this — this weird tingling everywhere in his body. Dazai whines again, and Chuuya tentatively reaches out to swipe some of the bangs off his forehead. “What can I do to help?”

“Nothing,” Dazai says. “Just hold me.”

And so he does.

Getting up for work the next is hard, to say the least.

Chuuya spent the whole night making sure that Dazai wouldn't accidentally get sick in the night and choke on his own vomit, which means that he's now listening to his subordinates talk with a total of, perhaps, two hours of sleep and a massive headache despite the count of three painkillers he swallowed earlier.

That's still doable, though.

It's the faces of the black lizard squad when he meets them in the lobby that tells him that he fucked up somehow.

"What?" he snaps when Tachihara's grin only ever seems to widen with each passing second.

"You look the worse for wear," Hirotsu comments, scratching a spot above his lip.

"Yeah, well, you don't look so fresh either old man."

Tachihara starts coughing loudly and when Chuuya shoots him a glare, he holds up his hands innocently. "Nothing. Nothing."

"No, there's clearly something you want to say, so spit it out." Tachihara doesn't, though, so Chuuya's gaze snaps to Gin, who remains just as quiet, only gaining a patch of redness on their cheeks. The old man Hirotsu is saved because Akutagawa arrives at the scene.

"Why are they being so weird?"

"Because they all know about the kitten you've been harboring at home," Akutagawa replies dryly without missing a beat.

And that's when Chuuya remembers —

That damn phone conversation.

He levels a glare at the traitor in question who must have betrayed him. "You told them?!"

"They were all there," Ryuu shrugs, "and you were on speaker."

"To be fair," Gin cuts in, scratching the back of their nape, "you two have already been seen together enough times before as well."

"God, you can't do anything around here without people being all up in your business," Chuuya mutters as he rubs his temple. "I had a little too much to drink, and I might have let some idiot steal my phone for

a second, okay? It's really not worth all this attention." When all they do is keep staring at him like he's some damn animal in the zoo, he jerks his head at them. "Go do your damn jobs!"

"Nakahara-san," Akutagawa says while the others scatter.

"What?!"

"You said you'd help me."

"Oh," Chuuya says, straightening his spine. "Right. The —" His brain physically hurts with the effort it takes to wade through the sea of memories of last night. "It was about the, uh, werewolf?"

"The weretiger."

"Obviously.The weretiger. What do you need?"

It's about this kid with a weretiger ability who has been running loose in the city according to several sightings. Some organization from the west set a bounty on him — a hefty sum — and Mori tasked Akutagawa with finding the guy. Akutagawa is — he's an exceptional ability user, that's for sure, but he's still lacking some soft skills when it comes to the less exciting parts of the mafia life: the waiting, the paperwork, *the locating subjects without killing them.* Although from what Akutagawa tells him, it sounds like he's closing in on the weretiger and it's only a matter of time until Chuuya can take him out for celebratory drinks for acing his first big-boy mission.

They're near the elevators when Higuchi steals Akutagawa to give him the newest reports about the case, and Chuuya uses the time to check up on Dazai — or, rather with Sakunosuke because *someone* has been silent.

"Hey, are you with Dazai right now?" Chuuya asks as soon as the man picks up. "Because he hasn't been answering my calls or texts, and he was still a little beat up this morning when I dropped him off at the dorm, so what I'm saying is: please tell me he's alive."

"He canceled our McDonalds lunch; said he's sick."

Chuuya swallows tightly. "And you just left him?"

"No. I'm in front of his room. I'm getting funny looks, but I said I'm waiting for my cousin to come home."

Well, that's better, but still…

Obviously, Oda is not his babysitter. He's just Dazai's bodyguard, so technically, he's not needed when Dazai's home, but — well, Dazai is Dazai, and Chuuya can't help but worry.

"Could you knock and see if he's awake?"

"Give me a moment." On the other end of the line, there is the sound of shuffling, then three knocks, and Oda's voice saying, "Hey, Dazai. You awake?"

Chuuya hears *something* in reply, though he isn't sure whether the unintelligible grumbling is Dazai.

Oda sighs. "He is —"

"Why are you still here?" Now that's definitely Dazai. "Is that — *Chuuya?"*

"Hey," Chuuya says lamely. "Stop ignoring my texts."

"Stop being so obsessed with me and let a guy have some *rest!"*

And the line goes dead, leaving him scowling at the phone.

Jesus, what an ass.

Chuuya's *not* obsessed. He's just a worrier. He worries about people he cares about.

Not even a few seconds later, his phone starts vibrating again. Thinking that it must be Oda, Chuuya picks up.

Except it's not Oda.

"Nakahara-san, this Tomita Hiro from the reception."

"Oh. Hello. Is something wrong?"

"No, but we received, um, a few packages for you, and we were wondering what to do with it?"

As far as Chuuya's aware, he hasn't ordered anything lately. Still, with his busy schedule nowadays, things get lost, so he doesn't think much about it as he pushes the elevator button. "Just leave it there. I'll pick it up later."

“That’s the thing. There are quite a lot of packages.”

“Huh,” Chuuya frowns, “how many are we talking about?”

“F-fifteen? Twenty maybe?”

“What?!”

“I don’t know, sir. If you didn’t order them, I could —”

“No, no. It’s all right. I must have forgotten about it. A bottle of wine and some self-care splurging, haha. You know how it is.”

“I can’t say that I do, sir.”

Damn.

“If you could have them delivered to my apartment?”

“That I can do."

“Great. Thank you so much.”

He really can’t catch a damn break, can he?

Worrying his lip, Chuuya opens his e-mails to see what that’s all about because he can’t for the life of him imagine ordering —

And oh.

His phone shows him a hefty bill and a few hundred articles of clothing. All from one fucking site.

Have you ever heard of retail therapy, Chuuya?

Of course, this is all Dazai's doing.

And yet Chuuya can’t find it in him to even feel angry about. Is the amount totally ridiculous? Yeah. Does he have the money for all that? Hell yeah. Is he sort of excited to show Dazai all the clothes, though? Also yes. Is he even more excited to see Dazai *in* those clothes? *Yes.*

“No,” Chuuya says out loud to his mirror image. “No, you aren’t. Very bad.”

Behind him, Akutagawa chooses this exact moment to come back and step inside the elevator.

Chuuya lets out a frustrated growl. “Not a fucking word.”

“I wasn’t going to. I have heard enough.”

For the next few hours, he gets stuck with an inhuman amount of paperwork for an incoming shipment from the east, although that means he only has to deal with his subordinates coming in and now then and even if they’re a little useless and a little short-sighted, they, at least, keep their mouths shut.

Dazai stays silent, too.

Chuuya’s almost finished for the day when the sun begins setting over the city, painting the sky in melting hues of red, orange, and violet. His last mission is stopping by in one of the warehouses responsible for the processing of stolen artifacts since he heard that there have been some sloppy mistakes made in the last few weeks. It’s by far one of the least favorite parts of the job: managing and overseeing all the thousands of tiny tasks that go into gaining profit. If he could, he’d just spend his entire day training his subordinates perfect control of their bodies and kick the ass of groups and organizations that think they can invade territories that aren’t theirs. Funnily enough, that’s what he thought he’d do when he got promoted to an executive.

The reality looks a little dimmer.

He’s on his way to his bike in the parking garage when he hears someone call his name behind him.

“Hey — Hey, Jesus.” That’s Tachihara’s voice. “You know, you walk pretty damn fast for a guy your height.”

Chuuya turns around, raising his brows. “Who you’re calling short, Tachihara?”

“Definitely not you,” the guy says, wheezing out laughter. “Where you going?”

“I need to check out a warehouse. What about you?”

“Home.”

Chuuya nods. “Ah.”

“I saw you, and I just wanted to say that you could have just told me that you’re dating someone instead of saying you adopted a kitten,”

Tachihara says with a faint grin. “I’m a big boy. I can handle it.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I know that, but we’re not dating, so —” He shrugs. “Nothing’s changed. Back then, I just didn’t know that… he’d stay in my life. As a friend.” Tachihara gives him an unimpressed look. “I’m serious."

“All right, if you insist.”

“In fact, to show you how much I am not lying to you right now, how about we have a drink again soon, huh?”

Tachihara’s eyes are still narrowed, not entirely convinced, but after a moment of staring him down, he makes a face. “Okay, fine. What about tonight?”

“I can’t tonight. I got this thi—” Chuuya trails off, wincing when he hears what he sounds like. “Okay, I know what this sounds like.”

“Look, it’s fine.” Tachihara smiles. “Some other time, yeah?”

“Yeah. Some other time.”

After the warehouse — it was the punk administrator’s fault on-site — Chuuya’s free to go home. A relaxing bath and a book, sound good, but…

Dazai still hasn’t texted. And even though he knows that Sakunosuke would have called if something had happened, Chuuya still takes the turn that will take him to the dorm instead of his apartment.

Because Sakunosuke needs some sleep.

Dazai needs to hear all about the fucking clothes he ordered.

And Chuuya…

Chuuya somehow doesn’t want to spend his entire evening alone when he’s gotten used to spending them with someone else. Sue him.

Sakunosuke isn’t keeping guard in front of the door anymore, but Chuuya forces himself to wait and see before getting worked up about as he knocks on the door. “It’s me,” he calls.

It takes a few seconds.

And *good.* It's Sakunosuke. (*Good,* Chuuya repeats mentally. He's doing his job and keeping Dazai safe.)

"I see Dazai was generous enough to let you in."

Dazai curled up in his bed, only lifts his gaze from the book he's reading long enough to glower at Chuuya like a grumpy cat. "I had no choice considering you had Oda watch me *even though I'm home."*

"I was scheduled to work today anyway," Sakunosuke remarks calmly, sitting down at the desk in the corner of the room.

Dazai ignores that. "At least *Oda* can just sit and write instead of being super annoying like *someone else."*

"Thank you, Sakunosuke-san," Chuuya tells him. "You're free to go if you want to. I got him."

"I am right here."

"I guess I could use a shower and some sleep." The man gathers a few things on the table — a notebook, pens, tiny, colorful sticky notes, before getting to his feet. "Text me when you plan to go to the library this week, Dazai."

Dazai nods wordlessly and returns to his book. Chuuya waits next to the closet, feeling weird and out of place in the strangely intimate dynamic that has grown between Dazai and his bodyguard. Only when the door clicks softly shut behind him does he really look at Dazai.

"Moody much?"

Dazai lets out a puffy huff but pointedly does not answer.

Letting out a sigh, Chuuya walks over and sits down on the edge of the bed, ignoring that long legs immediately try to kick him off it. "Look, if this is about last night —"

"Nothing happened last night," Dazai says. "We were both pretty inebriated, and now we are not."

"Okay… so why are you being such a little bitch then?"

"Why are *you* here?" Dazai counters.

Chuuya finds himself blinking at him.

“Are you still keeping up the suicide watch?” Dazai snaps, and *oh.* “Because I assure you, I am more than capable of having a bad day without trying to kill myself. I have managed to do it for the last twenty-one years without anyone’s help, and that hasn’t changed.”

“God, you’re so fucking dramatic,” Chuuya mutters, his fingers curling into fists by his side. “You want me to fucking spell it out for you? *Somehow* I have grown to like your stupid fucking face. We are *friends.* Yes, we’re friends, and don’t you *dare* fucking laugh at that—”

Dazai does, though. His stone-cold expression shatters when a soft snort escapes him, and he lifts a hand to cover his mouth, shaking his head. “Sorry. Sorry. This is... very funny.”

“Yes, you should be sorry,” Chuuya snaps. “I’m not here because I’m scared that you’ll kill yourself or because I pity you or something.”

“So you’re here because of my dazzling personality?”

Rolling his eyes, Chuuya steals one of Dazai’s pillows and uses it to keep his hands occupied. “Your dazzling personality or your pretty face — call it whatever you want, but I’m here, and if you have a bad day and want me to leave, then I will leave.” He turns to shoot Dazai a glance. “You want that?"

Dazai taps his long fingers against the cover of his book. “Can I… not talk?”

Chuuya feels his face soften. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“Okay. I guess I can tolerate your presence.”

“Say that again when you see the twenty packages of clothing that are waiting at my apartment.”

Dazai’s eyes widen.

“Oh yes,” Chuuya agrees smugly.

“You’re not going to send them back?”

“Uh, no. Not until we try them on.”

Chuuya glances around the room, trying to find something to do. He could mimic Sakunosuke and sit down at the desk, get some of tomorrow’s work done in advance. Or he could borrow one of Dazai’s books and see what pretentious classics he’s been reading. Or he could

play video games on his phone. Or…

“Do you…” Dazai starts suddenly. “Do you want to read with me?” Lifting the book, he reveals the cover for the first time — Howl’s Moving Castle — and Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “I stole it this morning. I’m still at the beginning, so we could start again.”

“There better be no ripped-out pages,” Chuuya warns him, but he’s already crawling over the bed and next to Dazai.

It’s a tight fit — a really tight fit because the space is all but nonexistent even when Dazai scooches over. “There aren’t. I wasn’t in the mood to hear you whine for twenty minutes.”

Chuuya scoffs. “I told you the book is even better than the movie.”

“Well, can you blame me for being skeptical when the movie is already a masterpiece in animation and story?”

No, he can not.

Dazai places the book in the middle between them, turning the page back to *one* as Chuuya tries to relax in the cramped space and allow himself to focus on reading.

But.

But —

“Okay,” Chuuya says after a few minutes. “Do you want to be the one lying down or sitting up?”

“Uh…”

“Quick.”

“Lying down,” Dazai blurts out.

Chuuya nods, already trying to figure out the logistics in his head. “Good. Fine. Scoot down.”

“On the bed?”

“Yes, on the bed, dummy. C’mon.”

Grudgingly Dazai moves forward, and Chuuya slides into the space he was just occupying, legs spreading around Dazai before he slips his

arms under Dazai's shoulders. "Now lean back into me."

"I am pretty sure this is sexual harassment," Dazai grumbles under his breath as he does so.

"Be lucky that someone as hot as me is even willing to cuddle you."

"You did call me pretty a few minutes ago." Dazai's muscles are entirely stiff when his back meets Chuuya's front, but Chuuya can feel them relax ever so slightly as they try to find a position that works for both of them like the two competent adults that they are. "The signals you're sending me are very confusing, you know."

"Your handsome face doesn't make up for all the bullshit that comes out of your —" Chuuya barely avoids saying *pretty mouth.* "— your, uh, normal-looking mouth." *Seriously, this is getting ridiculous,* he thinks as he takes over the book and holds it in front of both of them. "This okay?"

Dazai hums, his hair tickling Chuuya's nose. "'s… perfect."

Weirdly enough, it is.

Outside, wind howling, it's starting to get cold, but here, it's warm and safe and *good.*

It does get tiring to read like that after a while, sure, but Chuuya has read the book three times already anyway, and he's content lying here and listening to Dazai mutter out reactions every now and then.

It's perfect.

Chuuya ends up driving home at two in the morning — after chugging an energy drink, the only thing in Dazai's fridge, because he totally dozed off at some point.

Dazai shows up at his doorstep the very next afternoon. *Because of the clothes,* he says, and Chuuya agrees. *The clothes. Very important.*

As much as Chuuya would like to stay and watch Dazai try on pretty vests and sweaters, he also doesn't want to hover like some overbearing mother hen, so he starts preparing dinner in the kitchen instead, letting his playlist run in the background.

It feels awfully domestic, and Chuuya has a sense of foreboding in his chest that all of this? It won't last. It can't.

The sensation of being watched makes him cut off that trail of thinking and turn around. Dazai's in the doorway, wearing a sunshine-yellow sweater west and —

"It looks like a skirt," he says and then tugs at the black material, "but it's not!" He lifts his head to give Chuuya a wide, excited grin. "Isn't that amazing? I didn't know they make fake skirts."

Chuuya manages a nod. If he's entirely honest, he finds it a little hard to tear his eyes away, so speaking is a difficult task right now. "That's, uh, so cool."

"There are some clothes that would fit you as well," Dazai tells him, walking over to the stove to take a peek at what Chuuya has been cutting. "What are you cooking?"

"Food." Chuuya slaps his hand away when Dazai tries to steal a piece of carrot. "Wait until it's ready. Or better yet, help me. "

Making a drawn-out, annoying *mmmmm*-sound, Dazai twists his face into a grimace. "No, I don't think I will."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "Maybe that's for the best. It took three days to get that awful smell out of here after you tried making us dinner."

"See, this is the reason why I refuse to lift a finger. No one appreciates me in this house."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm such a bad friend," Chuuya mutters, but he can't help but welcome the banter because Dazai's voice is surprisingly soothing, a bit like the pattern of summer rain, and he's been missing it yesterday. "Can you get me some oil from the pantry?"

Being Dazai, he just remains standing there, clearly waiting for something. When Chuuya finally budges and looks at him, Dazai smiles sweetly. "And what will *I* get for that?"

"Free food."

Dazai pinches his lips together.

"A comfortable couch to sleep on at night."

"Speaking of which, your bed was more comfortable."

"A friend that won't punch you if you don't get moving in the next few seconds?"

“Ehhhh, Chuuya is *very* unconvincing.”

“God, fine. What the fuck do you want?”

“A free wish."

"Yeah, I got that but *what?"*

"A free wish that I can use later someday."

"Whatever. Just get me the damn oil."

Chuuya watches Dazai slide away on his socks with an stifled smile on his face before grabbing the knife to continue chopping vegetables, which doesn’t work out because his phone starts buzzing on the counter.

“Hey,” Chuuya says into the speaker after picking up. “What now?”

“I have the tiger,” Akutagawa’s voice tells him on the other end of the line.

“Great. You just got us all a bunch of money. Drinks are on y—”

“There has been a change of plans, Nakahara-san.”

Chuuya stops chopping. “Plans have changed how?"

“The boss wants to see you.”

Chapter End Notes

> I hope you guys had as much fun with this one as me! I am also incredibly thankful and super excited over all the comments ;__; It means so much and I’m really glad that you guys seem to be enjoying this. We’re going to be diving into more plot-ish territory with the next chapter! I also wanna pretend that we’re halfway there but ehhh it doesn’t really feel like it. Who knows, though. Who knows

Chapter 6: Someone with an Armit Fetish

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mori is sitting at his long table and waiting for him, a lone candle letting shadows dance over his features, when Chuuya enters the office. These kinds of meetings no longer creep him out as much as they used to but knowing what, or rather *who* is waiting for him at home, today's visit makes him feel more on edge than usual.

"Boss." Chuuya bows his head before sitting down at the designated seat that Mori nods at. A bottle of wine — *Pomerol*, not his favorite but close enough — and a plate with cheese and winegrapes. Mori has his fingers resting against a glass of whiskey. (And great, even that reminds Chuuya of Dazai because apparently everything in his life revolves around the stupid college student that has colonized his damn brain.) "I heard about the weretiger," Chuuya says, pouring himself some wine. "That's good news."

"Akutagawa-kun did a good job, yes," Mori says. "I'm glad to see that he's making progress."

"He's still a little brash, but it's getting better." *Just get to the point* is what Chuuya actually wants to say, but much like a puzzle, Mori likes to talks in riddles sometimes, clearly a fan of hearing his own voice. "Are you planning to sell the kid?"

Mori folds his hands together and rests his chin on them. "What do you know about *the guild*, Chuuya-kun?"

The guild.

Chuuya did his research on the way to the headquarters.

"They're an North American organization, but, much like their country, like to stick their nose wherever they please. Their agents are rumored to hold key positions in finance, politics and the military. Oh, and they're a *secret* society. They ain't legal."

"I'm sure they have plans to change that."

Chuuya's head jerks back. "And they want to do that with the help of some homeless kid?"

“They want the weretiger for *something.* What it is, I am still trying to figure out, so I’ve decided that in the meantime, keeping the user — Atsushi Nakajima — is more valuable than the bounty on him.”

“Makes sense.”

“And I want *you* to keep an eye on him in the meantime.”

“Me?” Chuuya asks. “What about Akutagawa? He brought him in.”

“Akutagawa-kun is essential in the field, but his mentorship skills are still lacking. The ability user is too important, and the guild will come here to try to get their hands on him under any circumstances.” As Mori raises his brows in challenge, something sharp and lethal glints in his eyes. “You can make time for something as important as that, can you not, Chuuya-kun?”

He knows.

Of course, he knows.

Chuuya forces himself to breathe normally. *In and out.* So Mori suspects that he is dating someone — he isn’t, but that’s what it obviously looks like to outsiders — but that doesn’t mean that he knows about Dazai’s ability. Chuuya found Dazai’s records after the second time he broke in: there were no mentions of a nullification ability. So, Mori is probably just testing Chuuya’s priorities. It’s fine.

“Of course,” Chuuya says and takes a sip of his wine. “That’s not a problem.”

“So Akutagawa. I’m giving you the responsibility of looking after the weretiger.”

Akutagawa’s face rarely betrays any emotions aside from lethal rage but the expression that slips out of him must be the closest thing to something akin to surprise. “Didn’t the boss give you that job?”

“Yes,” Chuuya says as they stop in front of a door at the end of the hallway. “But you hunted him down and brought him here. You already have history. And as the person responsible, I’m saying that the best choice of actions is making *you* his go-to guy right now. I’ll be there the whole time to keep an eye on it, but you, my friend —” Chuuya offers him a wide grin and claps his shoulder. “-- have just earned yourself a babysitting job.”

Akutagawa's only response is a flat stare before Chuuya finally opens the door.

The fight to get the weretiger wasn't an easy one and not without any injuries, so both Higuchi and Atsushi ended up in the infirmary. Only one of them is strapped to their bed, though, and only one of them is staring at them with wide, swollen yellow-violet eyes.

"W-who are you people?" The kid tries to free himself, but the shackles they used are ability-resistant — one of Kaiji's newest experiments. "I don't know anything about the fire, I swear! I-I'm nobody! I don't even have a hundred yens in my pocket! I don't even have A WALLET!"

"Relax," Chuuya barks out. "We're not here to hurt you."

"Then what do you want?! And why am I chained to the bed?! What are you going to do with me?"

"You're chained because we can't afford you to lose it and let you kill half of our staff."

All the color bleeds out of the boy's skin. "*Kill?!* I never killed *anyone*!"

"You killed lots of chicken," Akutagawa points out dryly. "You almost killed Higuchi."

"Almost!" comes Higuchi's voice from the back. "But not entirely! I'm more than fine now, senpai!"

Atsushi's lips start trembling violently as he shakes his head. "N-no, you must have made some mistake. I'm just a guy wandering the streets. *You* attacked me out of nowhere, and I — I blacked out — I didn't want to hurt anyone —"

"Yeah, but you did," Chuuya cuts in, crossing his arms, "and you could still, so do us all a favor and hear us out first."

Atsushi opens his mouth and closes it again like a fish, swallowing whatever words he will say next and pressing his lips together. Waiting.

Chuuya glances at Akutagawa. It's his show now, no matter what Mori says.

Akutagawa's eyes briefly slide to him before back to the kid. "You

turn into a white tiger. That's your ability. And there are people out there looking for you because they want that ability. So shut up and stop crying so —" Chuuya elbows him, interrupting his little speech. "So work with us, and we will make sure that no one will get their hands on you."

Except *us,* Chuuya thinks, but some things are better left unsaid, especially in the presence of such fragile minds.

"Show him the ropes," he instructs as he types out his address on the phone so he can send it to Akutagawa. "My address. In case there are any emergencies."

Akutagawa looks at him like a helpless toddler.

"Don't worry. I'm sure it'll be fine." Chuuya flashes him an amused smirk. "Oh, and Akutagawa-kun?"

"Yes?" the boy presses out through gritted teeth.

"Give him some fresh clothes, will ya?"

The newest proceedings not only mean that Chuuya is about to become a hell lot busier, what with the rookie who is on the verge of a panic attack under his care, but also that the routine as he knows it is about to slam on the brakes. As pretentious as he finds them, the guild will not stop until they have the ability user in their hands — that, or until the guild is no longer. And even though Chuuya has no qualms about that reality, it's going to take *time.* Conflicts take time, and they've got a full-on war on their hands.

It's going to be dangerous.

This is why, Chuuya invites Dazai and Oda, both of them, over to dinner the next day. Well, Dazai was still there waiting for him when he came home — he's been skipping classes, and it's both a relief and reason to worry — but *semantics.*

"Thank you for coming, Sakunosuke-san," Chuuya says and takes a sip of his wine glass. It's liquid courage for the suggestion he is about to propose. Not the easiest decision he has ever made, but he thought long and hard about it, and right now, it's the best solution. "I know today was your day off."

The expression on the bodyguard's face is as easy-going as the shrug.

“I knew what I was signing up for when I took the job.” He lifts his chopsticks to nod at the piece of tofu. “Plus, getting paid for eating for free? I have to thank you.”

“Aw, look at you two bonding,” Dazai cuts in with as much honest enthusiasm as politicians talking about the environment. “Now are you going to finally tell us what this is all for, Chuuya, or are you going to keep dragging it out?”

Exhaling a tongue-tied breath, Chuuya sets down his glass. “Right. Let’s get straight to the point.” He looks at the two of them. “I want you to move in with me. Both of you.” Yeah, no, that calls for another drink. Chuuya takes another quick sip, and before there are any objections or questions, he explains the situation. “The city is about to turn into a battlefield because a western group of ability users is dead-set on locating a specific person — one that *we* currently have and do not intend to let go. I’m not going to lie. It’s going to get ugly. Asking this of you is a lot,” Chuuya glances at Oda, “I’m aware of that. You have your own lives. But right now, I’d feel better if you stay here once shit starts hitting the fan.” That was *a lot* of talking. Chuuya can’t say he’s a fan of that. He prefers actions over words. “Okay,” he says, chest falling with another breath. “Questions?”

“I have one,” Dazai says. “Are we going to get goody-bags? You know, like in the movies, when people go to a sleepover?”

“Dazai,” Chuuya snarls, fist accidentally landing on the table, “take this serious, damn it.”

It’s not so much as a flinch, as Dazai going entirely still, and the physical pressure that wraps around Chuuya’s ribcage is nothing like he has ever felt before, an ocean of instant regret.

“I’m sorry. I just — this is important. People are going to die. I don’t want you to be one of them.”

If Dazai was in any way surprised by the sudden outburst a moment ago. In that case, it’s nowhere to be seen on his face anymore, a sunny smile flickering on, just like a fucking light switch that he used. “Someone’s in a bad mood ~.” Then he shrugs. “I guess I can tolerate Chuuya’s irritating presence for a few weeks.” His eyes finally meet Chuuya’s again. “How long are we talking about?”

“Weeks, yeah,” Chuuya says. “Maybe a month.”

Sakunosuke clears his throat on the other side of the table, dabbing

the corner of his mouth with a baby-blue napkin before speaking. “I will have to go out to check on my personal matters every now and then.”

“That’s fine. We can work out a schedule, so someone’s with Dazai at all times.”

“Wonderful,” Dazai mutters under his breath. “Just what every introverted person ever wants to hear.”

Chuuya cringes internally. Dazai’s life would have been so much easier right now if he had never stumbled into this apartment and met a damn mafia executive. Chuuya is selfish, he likes Dazai, he enjoys their time together — maybe even more than morally allowed — but he would also like to avoid seeing the people he cares about dying *because of him*, so if erasing everything they have right now would give Dazai live a safe and sound life without him, he’d do it. It would suck, but he’d do it.

“This place is huge,” Sakunosuke points out, taking a curious look around, before offering Dazai an encouraging smile. “I’m sure you will find a quiet corner to read a book.”

“Yeah, I better,” Dazai grumbles and produces something like a glare except that he just looks like an angry kitten that got woken up too early, “because you don’t want to meet Dazai, who is socially exhausted. I get very annoying. I would annoy you all to death before Chuuya’s enemies even have time to take us all out.”

Chuuya can’t help but smile as he shoves a shrimp into his mouth. Whatever comes next will not be easy, but he will give his damn hardest to hold onto this little bubble of happiness. The guild can die trying, though.

There are more questions. About Dazai’s job at the coffee shop, he works at that he really doesn’t need because Chuuya’s not about to demand rent from him. About his classes. For now, he’ll still go — when he feels like, that is — but with the bodyguard by his side. That might change when things get more serious.

After finishing dinner, they spend the rest of the evening moving things. Dazai doesn’t really own that much that he needs at Chuuya’s, mainly because he’s the owner of, like, a hundred new clothes since yesterday, so he mostly ends up packing tattered, worn-out, and physically abused books, as well as some electronic devices, reading glasses, a pillow in the shape of a boba cup, and lastly a framed

picture of a lama with sunglasses and a pink bandana.

Chuuya doesn't even bother asking.

Oda — *"now that we'll be roomies, you might as well call me by my first name"* — comes with a little more clothes although, much like Dazai, most of the baggage he's bringing consists of books.

It looks like Chuuya's penthouse is about to turn into a nerd cave.

Sweet.

When the time to *unpack* arrives, Chuuya realizes that maybe he should have put a teeny tiny bit more thought into this.

He has two bedrooms.

Two beds.

Granted, both of them offer more than enough space but considering he offered to house *three* people, he should have prepared to give each of them their own room as well.

"It's not a big deal," Oda says when he must realize what Chuuya is thinking when he pauses in his process of telling him where to put his stuff. "I can sleep on the couch."

With a half-tired, half-puzzled scowl, Chuuya places both his hands on his hips. "No, it's not okay. I have rooms, just without a bed right now." He chews on his lip. "I'll order one right away, but it might take a few days until it's here."

There are steps behind him, and Chuuya turns his head slightly to see Dazai come around the corner, wearing a pink leoprint bathrobe and a heart-shaped sleeping mask on his forehead — one that makes his bangs stick up in a very… adorable way. "Heh. Did Chuuya realize he miscalculated the sleeping situation?"

Chuuya huffs out a breath. "You could have told me, you know."

"It's funny to watch people realize their mistakes way too late."

"Do you see me laughing?"

Pressing his hands together, Dazai shrugs innocently and bats his ridiculously long lashes. "All I see is one grumpy Chuuya-kins." And then. "Oda should sleep in the guest room..."

Oda is silent as he clearly waits for Dazai to go on because he is not — oh no, he's not done at all with whatever scheme his little bastard brain has come up with. Just like Chuuya is waiting to hear the rest of it.

"... and I can sleep there too." Dazai first looks at his bodyguard, then swings his head around to gaze at Chuuya instead. "Right, Chuuya? That is a logical solution, no?"

Sure.

Yeah.

If you ignore the fact that Dazai is — and was — *Chuuya's* person first, and that he slept with his head in Chuuya's lap a few nights ago, and that he spent several hours sunk back into Chuuya's chest while he was reading, so that sharing a damn bed for a few nights shouldn't be that much more of crossing lines drawn in the sand.

Evidently, Dazai *is* ignoring all these facts, and that's — that's okay. Chuuya is not fucking jealous over the bodyguard that *he* insisted Dazai should have or anything. He is not jealous at all because he is twenty-one years old, a damn mafia executive who could take down this entire building if he wanted to, and, last but not least, because this isn't fucking middle school.

"Very logical," Chuuya presses out. The smile on his face must look as robotic as it feels because the way Oda's brows jump together would give Chuuya reason to worry if he wasn't currently the cause of it. "*Amazing.*"

He's not jeal—

"Or, I could sleep in your room because your bed is much more comfortable, and Oda and I are tall people, but you are not, so *us* sharing a bed would make even more sense," Dazai blurts out.

"Yes," Chuuya agrees, quick like lightning. "It's about…"

"The *balance…* of short and tall people. *Balance.*"

"Totally."

"All right," Oda interrupts, rubbing his head as if he has one thing too many today. Given his past, that must be saying something. "I'll unpack and then head to bed."

“Good night!” Chuuya calls after him, earning himself a wordless wave of goodbye.

“Sweet dreams, Oda!”

It leaves the two of them drenched in a syrup-thick silence that hangs off Chuuya with every silent beat that passes.

“Uh, I —” He starts at the same time as Dazai says, “Shall I —”

Chuuya forces out a breath through his nose. “You first, beanpole.”

“Should I bother unpacking?” As with many things that concern Dazai, it’s a question within a question, every single word out of his mouth hiding the depth of the entire ocean.

It’s getting late, though, and Chuuya is tired of skirting around things. He wants Dazai here. That much should be obvious by now.

“Yes,” he replies easily. “I don’t want to be tripping over your shit until the new room is ready.”

“Until the new room is ready, yes,” Dazai repeats and gives him a stiff thumbs up. “Got it, roomie.”

Chuuya just shakes his head before leaving to shower and then hopefully get a good night’s rest of sleep. He has a full day of work ahead of him tomorrow, and somewhere at the headquarters, Akutagawa is babysitting the poor weretiger right now. The possibility of an early wake-up call is sadly not low.

By the time he’s finished with his nightly skincare routine, and in a new pair of boxers, the lights in his apartment are all out. It’s a strange feeling to be tip-toeing down the hallways. It’s been ages since Chuuya lived with other people, but it’s not a bad one. Deep inside, he’s even looking forward to coming home to voices and smells and stories.

(He’s human, okay?)

His bedroom is dark when Chuuya slips inside, which means that Dazai must have already gone to bed. That’s fine by him. Their last conversation wasn’t exactly the —

“Chuuya?”

Clutching his chest, he closes his eyes. “Jesus, you scared me.”

“Really? Did you forget I was here?”

“No,” Chuuya murmurs, sitting down on the edge of the bed and checking his phone for any SOS texts from Akutagawa. Nope. So far, so good. “I just thought you were already sleeping.” After placing his phone on his nightstand, he slides under his silk sheets, lifting one arm above his head as he makes himself comfortable. “Usually, I can tell whether someone’s faking sleeping or not. You were fucking still.”

Dazai’s sleepy hum next to him makes him glance at him in the darkness. He’s on his side — turned to Chuuya, his arms tucked under the pillow. “That’s because I can control my own heartbeat.”

….

“What?”

“Yes. It come in handy.”

“For *what?!”*

“Things.”

Chuuya lies there for a while, musing what possible reasons one could have to learn something like controlling his own heartbeat. The world is full of crazy things like evil villains, abilities, and gods sleeping inside someone, but *that’s* a bit much, even for Chuuya.

“You know,” he hears Dazai say, “I can never sleep like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“With my arms above my head. Whenever I do that, I have a terrible fear that someone is going to start tickling me.”

A loud, unhinged snort escapes Chuuya’s throat, and he has to press his hand against his mouth to muffle his laughter, head tossing back. “That’s — that’s the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard in my entire life.”

“I’m *serious.”*

“What kind of intruder would start tickling you instead of robbing you or, y’know, murdering you?”

“I don’t know.” Dazai’s voice comes with a tinge of poutiness. “Someone with an armpit fetish. Is that a thing?”

“Probably, yeah,” Chuuya murmurs with a lingering grin stretched around his lips.

“See.”

“Well… I will protect you from any armpit fetishists that might break in here to torture you.”

“What if *you* decide to tickle me?” Dazai asks, indeed agitated by this improbable scenario.

“Yeah, because I don’t have anything better to do than tickle you at night.”

“I don’t know what sort of kinks you are into. You refused to answer that question, remember?”

And… Dazai has successfully managed to steer an innocent conversation into dangerous territory. He is exceptionally good at that.

“Dazai,” Chuuya warns. It sounds a little breathless, but he can pretend it comes from all the exhausting laughing that he did.

“*What?”*

“Go to sleep.” Because if he starts thinking about his kinks with Dazai in his bed, his thoughts might connect these two things, and what Chuuya does not want is to spend the next hour silently suffering because it’s been a hot minute since he has jerked off, let alone gotten any.

He hears a quiet, throaty yawn next to him, then the sound of Dazai sinking deeper into the mattress. “Okay, armpit sniffer.”

Chuuya only shakes his head.

The persistent sound of the buzzing of his phone all but drags him out of sleep.

Chuuya groans slightly, trying to make his lids open, as he reaches over to the nightstand. His screen is way too bright in the darkness of the room, but the name that stares at him is *Akutagawa,* and that spells trouble.

“Yeah?” he says, sitting up. His eyes wander to his side where Dazai is

sleeping with his face pressed into the pillow and curled up like a cat.

“Chuuya-san. It’s me.”

“I know it’s you. What do you want? Did something happen?”

“I’m in front of your building.”

“Christ,” Chuuya mutters and slides out of bed. “What’s happening?”

“I’ve got a…situation here.”

It’s a little funny. Chuuya has never heard this particular tone of helplessness from Akutagawa. What it is also is fucking annoying because a glance at the clock on the wall reveals that it’s half past three in the morning, and Chuuya’s pretty sure he was in the middle of a wonderful dream before he got woken up.

“Do I even want to ask?” After slipping into a black silk-yukata, Chuuya softly lets the door fall shut behind him. “Should I come down, or do you need to come up?”

“Actually, I think I should come up.”

“Fucking fine. Don’t wake any of my neighbors.” He hasn’t had trouble whatsoever with any of them so far, and Chuuya doesn’t plan to change that.

He spends his time waiting by grabbing himself a glass of cold water to drink before he hears a quiet knock on his door.

The picture behind it is… morbidly comical.

Akutagawa’s coat sleeve has a giant tear in the shape of claws. What’s even funnier is the look on his face, a lost child trying to do taxes. Next to him is Atsushi, eyes red-rimmed and wet stains all over his cheeks. His right hand is a ginormous tiger paw, beans and claws and all, *and* he is wearing an exact replica of Akutagawa’s atrocious coat.

“Now ain’t you two a pair?” Chuuya can’t help but say before stepping aside to let them in.

“He’s —” Akutagawa starts, although the guttural sob that comes from the weretiger makes him lower his voice a few octaves, not making him sound any less irritated. “He keeps crying every time I try to talk to him!”

“B-because you keep *yelling* at me!” Atsushi snaps back and angrily wipes at his eyes. “A week ago, I was just a nobody in my orphanage, and now — now I’m in the mafia and Americans are looking for me and —” his voice pitches into a screeching, desperate cry. “-- now I have this!” He holds up his paw and desperately points at it. “This! W-what am I supposed to do with this? I can’t even hold a cup with this thing?!”

Chuuya shoots Akutagawa a questioning look. “Really? You woke me up because of a mental breakdown?”

“I could deal with this better if you allowed me to use physical violence so we can control his abil—”

“And I’m stuck with a *psychopath*!” Atsushi continues, taking several steps away from Akutagawa. “Please let me go! I won’t tell anyone about the mafia and what you do. *I swear.”*

“Shut up,” Chuuya cuts in with a snarl. “Both of you. Be fucking quiet.”

Their mouths fall shut, but judging by the furious, emotional looks in both of their gazes, this solution is only scratching the surface of the problem.

“You,” Chuuya says, a bit nicer this time as he takes a few steps towards the weretiger and places a hand on his shoulder. “You haven’t mastered full control of your ability yet. That’s why you’re stuck with the paw right now. It’s not impossible, though. We’ll train you, and it’ll get better with time. I promise.” He starts guiding him into the kitchen, where Atsushi can take a seat at the table. “Do you want anything to drink? A snack maybe?”

“I’m not hungry,” Atsushi mumbles and miserably lifts his paw. “Not that I could even do that!” His desperate gaze swivels to Chuuya, who’s pouring water into the kettle. “Can you really train me to — to control that *thing?”*

“Yeah. I’m sure you’ve met Akutagawa’s ability, right?”

Atsushi nods weakly.

“It’s hard to believe, but he didn’t have full control of Rashoumon at first either. Takes some time and effort, but it’s manageable.” Chuuya gets out two cups and sets them down on the counter before offering the kid a swift smile. “I need to talk with Akutagawa. I’m going to be

right back, okay?"

"Okay. I'll just… sit here. And wait."

Right.

Akutagawa, for his part, doesn't seem to have moved ever since Chuuya left him here either.

"You," Chuuya begins —

"Chuuya?"

And that's —

"Dazai," he says, lips parting ever so slightly as he takes in the bed hair, the oversized grey t-shirt he's wearing, and the sleepy but curious glimmer in Dazai's expression as his eyes focus on Akutagawa. "You're… awake."

Dazai gives him a look. "It's hard to sleep when someone is yelling outside the door." Right. "Who is this? Oh, is it your *work?"*

God, Chuuya was hoping to avoid mixing Dazai and the port mafia for a little longer. Life, apparently, has other plans.

"That's Akutagawa," he says, nodding at the still-silent guy. "Akutagawa, meet Dazai."

Dazai's eyes widen with what must be recognition. "I know you. We *talked.* You know you look exactly as I imagined you in my head."

Akutagawa swallows awkwardly and shoves his hands into the pockets of his dirty, ripped coat. "You don't look like anything I imagined."

"Oh," Dazai says, "okay."

"Riiiight." Grabbing Akutagawa's arm, he nudges him towards the kitchen. "Can you make sure Atsushi isn't trying to kill himself with a fork? I need a minute."

"Chuuya-san, I can't. *I* will stab myself with a fork if I have to talk to him again."

"*Akutagawa,"* Chuuya's smile isn't friendly, "I'm not asking."

Once Akutagawa disappears around the corner, Chuuya turns to Dazai

with a sigh, who is standing quietly in the doorway and watching the entire scene unfold like a passive bystander. Chuuya rubs his temple as he murmurs, “Sorry for waking you.”

“From what it looks like, you are not to blame.”

“You’re right.” Arms crossed, Chuuya tilts his head. “How much begging will it take to make you go back to bed?”

“None, because I won’t.”

“Dazai —”

“Chuuya,” Dazai says and produces a feather-light grin. “If I live here, then I might as well meet your friends. Besides, I can be useful.”

“Oh yeah?” Chuuya quirks an eyebrow. “What you’re gonna do, write a literature analysis about the entire situation?”

“You know it wounds me that you think that’s all I can do.”

“Oh no, I know *exactly* what you’re capable of. That’s *why —”* Dazai simply leaves. ”Chuuya blinks at the now-empty spot that Dazai was just standing in. “He just left.”

With a sigh, Chuuya looks at the ceiling and the invisible being up there responsible for making his life as chaotic as possible before following Dazai into the kitchen.

Of course, he is already too damn late to stop things from happening.

“Oh my god!” Atsushi cries, wagging his hand — not a paw anymore — in front of his face like he is seeing things. “You made it stop!” He stares at Dazai in half-disbelief and half-astonishment. “How did you do that?”

Sitting next to him, Dazai gives him an enigmatic smile, though his words are unmistakably aimed at Chuuya. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“He can nullify abilities?” Akutagawa asks him propped up against the kitchen island.

Chuuya shoots him a warning look. “Nope. He doesn’t.”

“I can,” Dazai, ever so helpfully, provides without missing a beat.

Akutagawa tries to catch Chuuya's gaze, but Chuuya *refuses* to even let him utter the idea he is clearly trying to impose on him. "Chuuya-san, we could use him f—"

"No," Chuuya snaps. "No, we can't use him because he is a fucking *college student,* for fuck's sake, and if you try to bring it up again, or even *dare* to breathe a word about his ability to *anyone,* I swear to god, I will rip out your neck and make you regret to having ever joined the port mafia, got it?"

It's as clear as a day that Akutagawa is not happy with it, all but oozing displeasure, but he keeps his mouth shut and nods.

Chuuya doesn't like threatening his own people, but it's precisely what he was trying to avoid for the past weeks. As soon as Mori hears about the nullification ability? It's over. Dazai won't die, but he will be coerced into joining the mafia, whether it's by physical torture or threatening someone he cares about. There was not a single kid that managed to turn down Mori's 'offer' to join who came out alive.

Chuuya can't let that happen to Dazai.

He *won't.*

He lets out a strained breath, ignoring the heavy gazes of everyone in this room on him. "Good. That's… good. Take the couch with Atsushi. Get some rest. Tomorrow will be a long day."

Akutagawa obeys wordlessly, pausing next to Atsushi until the weretiger gets up, offering Dazai a tentative wave in goodbye before following Akutagawa out of the kitchen.

"Well, that was dramatic," Chuuya hears Dazai say behind him.

"Let's just go back to bed."

"What are you so afraid of?" Dazai asks after he turns off the light.

"Why are *you* not afraid of anything?" Chuuya shoots back because *seriously.* This isn't a petty family feud or a stupid friendship clique that Dazai is getting himself into. It's the damn *mafia.* Dazai should be scared, but instead, he only ever seems to push closer.

After a few moments, Dazai says, "I can't imagine life getting any worse."

Chuuya sucks in a deep breath.

“Dying would mean no more of this terrible emptiness inside my head. And getting noticed by the mafia… well, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. We could work together. Maybe we could be partners.”

“It would be bad, Dazai.”

“I just want a purpose. I exist, I go to university, I read books, but it’s — it’s all so useless. Nothing matters. Maybe I need to get closer to death to capture the full picture of what it means to live.”

Chuuya sits up abruptly and reaches over to grab Dazai’s hand, interlacing their fingers. “*This* is what it means to live, Dazai. Touching someone. Feeling your heart race inside your chest. Laughing. Loving. Fucking. Seeing the world. Eating good food. Doing things that you like every day. That’s life. And I guarantee you, you won’t find that slaving away for an organization that only really cares about money and power.” He squeezes his hand, tries to make Dazai feel the pulse inside their veins. “Violence and death won’t fill that fucking hole inside you, Dazai. They will only feed it.”

Dazai says nothing for several moments, and Chuuya doesn’t really expect a reply anyway. Falling back onto his back, he goes to withdraw his hand, but he finds himself not being able to. Literally. Dazai’s fingers are clutching his hand and refusing to let go.

“So why are you in the mafia?”

And isn’t that a great question?

"Because," Chuuya murmurs, "it's too late for me to get out." The mafia is a spiderweb, and once you spend too much time with it, once you become too intertwined in that net of power and money, it becomes practically impossible to twist your way out again. "It's not too late for you, though."

Dazai's nails dig into his skin. It feels a little like the physical version of disagreeing — that is until his hand systemically relaxes again, and Chuuya realizes it's probably an unconscious gesture. Dazai's equivalent of chewing his nails or bouncing his foot.

"Fine. I won't join the mafia when they realize how great of an asset I am and beg me on their knees to save all their sorry bums."

Chuuya snorts softly.

"But I can still help," Dazai adds. "You. Not them. And no one has to know. But I want to help." It feels like the *I need something to do to feel useful* goes unsaid. Thankfully, Chuuya has become quite apt at translating Dazai's tongue-puzzles into a language he can understand.

"All right," he agrees. "I don't see why you shouldn't. Lord knows you're a little freeloader."

"I…" Dazai yawns. "... I consider…"

Chuuya's unsure how he was planning to finish that, but he's fine leaving it up in the air anyways. Life is not a sentence; not everything needs a period at the end.

Even in his sleep, Dazai doesn't let go of his hand.

Chapter End Notes

> This chapter was supposed to be a 10k monster but I'm too tired and not in the right headspace to edit all of it, so I decided to split it in half! Good news is that the next update will be posted within the next few days :)
>
> Thank you so much for all the love and support ;_____; I am not kidding I have the biggest brainworms and wrote like 30k words ahead in the last 10 days. Exam season is starting soon, though, so at least I'll still be able to update regularly even if I'll be busy studying and having 10 mental breakdown a day lmao
>
> Next up we have: an awkward breakfast, an observation, a tender gesture, and an unexpected guest!

Chapter 7: Little Project Runway

Chapter Notes

content warnings:
- scars

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following day, breakfast is an awkward affair.

It's one thing to eat with Dazai and Oda, but having not only Akutagawa — brash, awkward Akutagawa — but the anxious weretiger at the table is something else entirely.

At least, Dazai does stick to his promise last night and doesn't insert himself into anything mafia-related. Instead he asks a few, more or less, harmless questions.

“So, Atsushi-kun. Don’t you find getting a job — and such a cool one, at that — exciting?”

The kid’s brows crease as he looks at his rice bowl like it’s going to give him the right answer. “I guess… I’ve never really had a job before.”

Dazai makes a curious sound in response.

Chuuya only eats, still two cups of coffee behind before his social charisma starts kicking in.

“They didn’t let me do much at the orphanage,” Atsushi continues, “because I always failed at the tasks that I was given.”

Akutagawa shrugs completely straightfaced. “There is no room for failure in the mafia, Jinko. I hope for you that you left it in your past.”

Atsushi blanches. “Well, I told you I’m not going to be of any use to you!”

“Oi,” Chuuya cuts before it can escalate any further, “there is *always* room for growth. Don’t worry. We’ll teach you.”

“*You* should,” Akutagawa retorts. “I can’t deal with someone this incompetent.”

“I had to deal with your overzealous, anger-ridden ass, didn’t I?” Chuuya clicks his tongue when his only reply is guilty silence. “Give the kid a damn minute.”

“*I* need more coffee,” Oda announces before getting up.

Chuuya gets it. He really does. When he invited Dazai and Oda to stay here, he never signed up for *this.*

“I’ve had the same doubts, Atsushi-kun,” Dazai tells him, grinning like he’s amused by his own words. “Everything is so new and scary at the beginning but before you know it, you will get used to it.”

“Really?” Atsushi’s eyes glimmer with something like hope for the first time this morning. “What do you do?”

“I work with heat and dangerous animals. Quite like yourself, actually.”

“T-tigers?!”

Dazai gives him a coy nod. “Predators.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. *Dazai works in a damn coffee shop that also houses a few dozen stray cats because his employer is an animal lover — and he’s had, perhaps,* one *shift in the entire last month.*

But Chuuya doesn’t butt in because Atsushi is actually smiling as he listens to Dazai talk, and that’s ten times better than anything Akutagawa has accomplished so far. Too bad he cuts off breakfast when it gets best, sending Akutagawa and Atsushi ahead of him since there is a to-do list waiting for them at the headquarters and it’s not going to go done by itself.

He's in the middle of buttoning up his shirt when Dazai slips inside the bedroom and unceremoniously flops down on the bed like a starfish. The faint, muffled sound of a dying whale comes from him.

"See," Chuuya says. "This is why I told you to sleep."

I did, but your snoring woke me up at some point."

"I don't snore."

"Sure you do." Dazai lifts his head and smiles sweetly. "I pretended that it was the sound of the sea, though. It was like white noise. Very relaxing."

Chuuya lets out a huff of breath as he grabs his harness from the closet. "Asshole."

"Hey."

"Hmh?"

"Chuuya."

"What?"

"Atsushi… he needs to hear that he's doing something useful if you want him to work with you."

Chuuya's movements slow around himself, and he blinks at the bed and at Dazai lying on it with his cheek propped up against his hand as he considers that. "What exactly do you mean?"

"He kept mentioning that he was a nuisance to everyone, a failure," Dazai elaborates with a shrug, "He even felt bad for waking you up."

"Well, he should," Chuuya grumbles under his breath. "I am feeling pretty damn tired."

"Give him a reason to want to work something. Even if it's a lie. Just give him something to believe in, and he will dance like a puppet on a string."

"Huh."

Chuuya keeps waiting for Dazai to go: *Ha! Now, will you finally introduce me to everyone at work?!* but the words never come. With his chin resting on his folded hands, Dazai simply lies there and watches Chuuya gets dressed.

"Imma see what I can do," Chuuya finally says once his vest is shrugged on. "Good catch. See you tonight?"

Dazai hums, and that's that.

The next few days are a pain in the ass.

Chuuya doesn't like vague threats and the guild is one blurry, ambiguous motherfucker on the other end of the fucking ocean. Clearly *there,* just not visible yet.

There are meetings with subordinates, with port mafia's partners that are getting antsy, with the boss. Their business obviously has to keep running. Some nasty rumors have to be squashed. And the entire time, Chuuya has to make sure that the mafia's latest rookie won't accidentally turn into a fucking tiger because Akutagawa pisses him off enough to make him freak.

And then, two of Chuuya's subordinates go off the grid.

That pisses him off the most because members of his team *do not* simply vanish into thin air. After his promotion to an executive, he deliberately worked out a communication system to stay connected to all the losers that he's responsible for. He checks in with them regularly to see how they're doing under the stress. *His subordinates don't just disappear,* and yet, two of them have.

Needless to say that he's in a shit mood most of the time.

Coming home to warm homemade food and Dazai's voice animatedly talking about a book he read and Oda contributing here and there helps. For thirty minutes, at least, because in times like these, leaving the headquarters doesn't actually mean leaving the pile of work there as well. He just has to continue somewhere else.

One evening, Chuuya and Oda both end up unloading the dishwasher. Dazai disappears after pushing the food on his plate back and forth the entire dinner.

When Chuuya first met the bodyguard, he didn't think much of him. Sure, he seemed adequate, and yeah, his ability was impressive, but aside from Dazai, they didn't have anything in common, but it turns out that might have been a hasty statement. It's not like they're best friends — certainly not sharing the same weird and special bond Dazai and he share. But Sometimes they sit down on the balcony, enjoy a few drinks, discuss dinner plans or grimy details of their work. Other times, they find themselves here in the kitchen, helping each other just for the sake of human contact, even if Chuuya could let *for the tainted sorrow* do all the work for them.

Which is why he feels comfortable enough to ask, "How has he been doing?"

Oda's hand absently scratches at his jaw. One of the things Chuuya appreciates the most about him is the simple honesty behind each word. When asked a question, he takes his time to actually think about it. No prefabricated lies or half-truths that only serve to make

someone happy. He means what he says. "He could probably be better."

"Has he been going to his classes?"

"Two times. Then he announced he is too smart for his syllabus anyway."

"Did he talk to anyone there?" Chuuya can't help but prod. "Friends?" Something he has always been curious about. Dazai only ever leaves bread crumbs about that side of life. Whenever Chuuya tries to follow the trail, he risks scaring away the feral, stray cat in his home, so yeah, if he has a chance to pry into Dazai's social life, he'll take it, damn it. "Classmates? Professors?"

Oda shakes his head, and it looks as sad as his smile.

Chuuya lets out a heavy sigh. *They think I'm weird,* is what Dazai once said about wearing skirts and bandages — somehow, *that's* the part of the night that Chuuya still remembers — but Chuuya always assumed that young people these days would be more open. The guy wears fucking bandages every day. So what?! There are probably just as many other questionable fashion-fauxpauxs every day on campus. Granted, Chuuya doesn't have much experience with, you know, civilians who lead normal lives and have normal everyday struggles. *Still.* Isn't today's society supposed to be more progressive?

"Dazai doesn't need a lot friends. He needs…" Oda trails off and waves about his hand with a comically forlorn expression on his face.

A purpose?

Anti-depressants?

Therapy?

Hugs?

The eternal question. If Chuuya knew what would fill that hole in his chest, he'd give it to him in a heartbeat, but that's the thing about reality. Nothing can be cured in an instant. It's a damn long process that can last a lifetime.

"Yeah," Chuuya agrees sarcastically. "Totally got you, dude."

Oda makes a face as he dries off a glass. "You know what I mean."

Chuuya hums before tossing the towel on the counter. "Gonna check on him. Thanks for the rice balls. They were —" Pressing together thumb and index finger, Chuuya makes a kissing noise. "— delish." He walks out of the kitchen to the sound of laughter.

A soccer game is running on the TV but no one's in the living room. Dazai's not in the bedroom either. The bathrooms are unoccupied. Chuuya doubts he'd do anything as helpful as laundry but checks it anyway. Nope. The patio outside is empty. Oda's future room is too busy being redecorated right now. Which only leaves one place…

The library.

It was supposed to be an office when Chuuya moved in here, and it still has a desk, a high-end computer with two screens, and a shelf filled with files and folders and whatnot. It's just that Chuuya barely uses it. Usually, when there is work to be done, he prefers staying at the headquarters where most of his friends and colleagues are nearby.

Usually.

The rest of the vast space is filled with bookshelves lining the walls and marching across the floor in rows, curling around an atrociously indigo-colored beanbag, a couch, and a round wooden desk. Chuuya's not sure when he started hoarding all these books, to be honest. He had all this money all of a sudden. After a while, he had enough clothes and enough visits to high-end restaurants where he only bought the most expensive bottles of wine. Books, however… those never got boring. Even if all they do is stand around her and look pretty since Chuuya's too busy to actually read most of the time. Besides, a few missions have left him with some extraordinary black-market content.

Something that Dazai must have discovered by now as well as it seems.

The library is utterly quiet when Chuuya enters it. The person spread out on the fluffy carpet on the floor holding a book in front of him is too.

Chuuya snorts. "A beanbag and a couch, and you still chose the carpet?"

"We have become one," Dazai mumbles as he lazily turns the page.

"Sweet." Camaraderie makes Chuuya sink down next to him, leaning

back against the couch and crossing his legs. "Whatcha reading?"

"Society rejects playing fictional stickball."

It's clear that Dazai's not in the mood for a conversation right now. Chuuya doesn't want to force him either, especially because it would take Dazai approximately three seconds to figure out that Chuuya's *worrying*. That would turn into another repetitive argument that they've been through several times now. So instead, Chuuya walks over to his desk and gathers some files and his iPad before returning to his spot next to Dazai.

He notices the curious glance of interest that Dazai slides his way as he does so, though Dazai remains quiet and continues reading his book.

They work like that for a while. Chuuya scans his team's reports on the last whereabouts of the two missing subordinates as well as other unusual sightings and clues that might tie their disappearance to the guild. Or maybe, another organization. God knows the port mafia has enough enemies to keep itself busy for the next decade. Chuuya just doesn't really want to believe that someone from his team defected.

He knows it's a common occurrence in the mafia. Not everyone has the mental strength to live in that kind of high-strung environment without losing their mind or shredding their own well-being to pieces. But…

But Chuuya likes to think of himself as a decent team leader, and if he can't even notice that two of his people were thinking about taking off, then what else could he be missing?

Chuuya gets yanked out of his thoughts when Dazai drives his fingers through his hair for the eleventh time before he sits up — quite aggressively, by the way — and tries to tie his bangs into a tiny, high ponytail — tries, really, because he ends up huffing and puffing and miserably failing.

"Need a hand?"

"No," Dazai snaps, and when his hair keeps falling into his face, he lets out a defeated sigh and flops onto his back. "My hair is very irritating."

"I could tie into several ponytails, so it wouldn't keep bothering you."

"It's not that. It's stinky."

A startled laugh bursts out of Chuuya. "Huh?"

"I might have skipped a few showers," Dazai admits, "and now it looks awful and flat, and it *smells*." Lifting his hand, he gives Chuuya a look. "I'm this close to reenacting Britney Spears' breakdown in 2007. Quite frankly, she was ahead of her time."

"You could —"

"Wash it," Dazai finishes for him hastily. "Yes, Chuuya! Why, oh why have I not thought about that before? You are such a genius."

"I —"

"The act of showering is actually very stressful. Sometimes I stand and I feel like my legs will break down any second now. So even thinking about it is draining me. I don't have time to wash my hair, Chuuya! It's exhausting!"

Chuuya lets the silence marinate for a few moments, ensuring that Dazai is truly finished before pressing out a crooked smirk. "I was going to say I could wash it for you."

Across from him, Dazai stills.

"If you want to, that is," Chuuya adds after several seconds pass in which he gets neither a response nor even a twitch in the blank sheet of paper expression. "No pressure…?"

"I…." Dazai turns away and looks at his hands. "I did not think I would ever get asked that question, so I don't have a response for this."

Chuuya's chest shakes with the bubble of laughter coming from his throat. "Well, do you feel like it's something that'd make you feel better or the opposite?"

"Probably. It just comes with so many tiny exceptions." His gaze pointedly directs at the bandages around his arms and legs, and oh.

Chuuya is aware that at this point, he should drop it for the sake of simplicity and let Dazai read in peace, but… he doesn't give a single flying fuck about putting in a bit more extra effort to accommodate Dazai. There are a thousand ways to make this happen, and he'd try out every single one of them.

"Bubble bath?" Chuuya asks. And then, with a lop-sided smirk. "With champagne?"

"I do like the champagne part..." However, he still looks torn.

Giving him space and time to make up his mind without any bribes or expectations, Chuuya doesn't say anything else. Instead, he relaxes against the couch behind him and scribbles some notes down on his paper.

"Okay," he hears Dazai say after a while. "You can do it. *Whatever.* Don't look at me like that."

Unfazed by the rapid-fire mix of defensive mechanisms, Chuuya climbs to his feet with a slight groan before offering his hand to Dazai to help him up as well. "Can I style your hair too?"

"Chuuya wants to give me an even haircut so that I look just as ridiculous as him, doesn't he?"

"No scissors involved. Promise."

"I will be your little project runway," Dazai says and lifts his index finger in clear warning, "*once."*

Chuuya agrees with a wordless nod as he guides them out of the library, a hand on the back of Dazai's shoulder blades steering him into the right bathroom.

"How did you get that horrid haircut anyway?" Dazai asks when Chuuya switches on the faucet to let the water into the tub.

"It got cut off on a mission once."

"Just… one side?"

"Yup." Chuuya re-enacts the scene with his left hand, letting it swish across the part of his hair that isn't there anymore. "It was some freak fire ability. I was lucky enough to keep *any* hair."

"And then you decided to keep all of it?" Dazai asks dubiously, awkwardly sitting down on the edge of the tub and kicking his feet back and forth.

"I was trying to grow out my hair, and I was not about to let some shithead stop me from that."

"Why?"

Chuuya scoffs. "Have you seen me with long hair? I'm hot."

Dazai does not reply with as much enthusiasm though Chuuya does notice him absently tug at a few of his strands.

"I'll get your bathrobe," Chuuya announces once there is enough water and, more importantly, *bubbles, "*and champagne."

"How about a personal orchestra, too?"

"Don't push it, asshole."

Chuuya takes his sweet time gathering things. The amount of times Dazai turns to alcohol whenever he's feeling funky is probably not healthy, but the person who likes to drink four glasses each night before bed so that sleeping will include more sleeping and fewer stress bombs exploding in his head doesn't really have the right to judge. Chuuya also cuts up some strawberries and bananas as a little snack. Letting all of it trail behind him in the air, Chuuya only grabs Dazai's bathrobe — that and his work files at the last minute.

"Dazai?" he calls before he opens the door.

His reply is an uppish: "You may enter, peasant."

"Fuck off," Chuuya mutters, walking inside, only taking a brief glance at Dazai surrounded by a kingdom of bubbles as he lets the bottle and the fruit plate land on the edge of the tub while he rolls up his sleeves and grabs his most-cherished bottles of shampoo and conditioner.

Thankfully, there is a shelf right behind the tub so that Chuuya doesn't have to climb inside and only has to sit down, albeit with his thighs spread around Dazai's head.

He shoves his iPad into Dazai's hands before he can change his mind.

"What's this?"

"Work notes," Chuuya replies as he brushes through Dazai's hair first. "So that you won't get bored."

"Oh," Dazai hums. "Cool. Okay. Cool. Cool. Very cool."

Chuuya fondly rolls his eyes before going to work. With the help of the showerhead, he first gets Dazai's hair nice and wet, careful not to

spray too much water on the iPad even if it's supposed to be water-proof — Chuuya can't trust these things — before squirting some shampoo into his hand and starting to massage it into Dazai's scalp. Even now, he feels Dazai's muscles go taut with pretty much every motion, although Dazai tries his damnest to rerelease the tension.

It's funny, Chuuya thinks, how the act of relaxing requires so much work from Dazai.

They don't really talk much aside from a few "is the water okay?" s or "does this hurt?" s. From the way Dazai furiously goes back and forth between two pages on the iPad, he must be pretty into it. Even though Chuuya finds Dazai's wordlessly-evident excitement absolutely adorable, he can't help but worry, too.

It's just *one* work file. One case. Not even any of the dirty side of the work Chuuya does, but several reports and sightings about his subordinates' last whereabouts. As long as Mori never gets wind of it, it's okay to let Dazai read about it from the safety of Chuuya's penthouse. It's fine. It is.

And isn't it funny how only months ago Chuuya wanted nothing more than to have a quiet evening to himself without some stupid drunk college student intruding on his plans?

The hum Dazai lets out when Chuuya's in the process of putting conditioner in his hair, brushing through the thick strands with his fingers, is loud enough to put him out of the trance.

“Curious,” Dazai murmurs.

Chuuya pauses to glance over his shoulder. "What is?"

"This right here." Dazai points at one particular sentence on the screen. "How would they have used that alley if it was a dead-end?"

Frowning, Chuuya tries to think of a reasonable explanation.

He can't.

"Precisely," Dazai comment as if he heard what was going through his head. "They couldn't. One does not simply vanish into thin air. Unless…"

"Unless what?"

For a few moments, Dazai's quiet, and then out of fucking nowhere, he jumps to his feet, and with it, he lets half of the water inside the tub slosh to the floor, the carpet, everywhere.

"Dazai, damn it!"

"I got it!"

"Sit the fuck down," Chuuya growls. "You're going to flood my fucking bathroom."

In front of him, Dazai's not entirely naked — he chose to leave on a pair of… interesting boxer briefs: cherry-red with neon-yellow bananas all over it — but… he has a body. A human body. And really long legs. Like, *inhumanly* long. Seriously, Chuuya thinks, he could have become a fucking supermodel. And there are scars, too. Lots of them. Small and big ones. Thin and thick. However, the thing that stands out most is the grin on his face, rivaling the sun itself.

Chuuya looks away before he flies too close to it and ends up with burned wings.

Dazai does sit down — without any grace once again, letting even more water spill out. It's not an issue for Chuuya. All he has to do is lean down and press his fingers into the liquid all over the floor, but the whole thing does make for a pretty loud commotion so that before Dazai can even utter his grand revelation, the door bursts open.

Chuuya and Dazai both turn to look at Oda, slightly out of breath and eyes wide as concern bleeds into an embarrassed confusion. "I thought someone was getting drowned… but you…"

"We're working!" Dazai exclaims, holding up the iPad.

"Doing some self-care," Chuuya mutters weakly and presses out a pitiful smile. "Yay —"

As quickly as he burst in, Oda backs out of the door, leaving Chuuya with a startling thought in his chest. The chances of Oda assuming that the two of them are a thing must be astronomically high by now. Great. Technically, it doesn't make much of a difference. But somehow, it evokes a weird tingling in Chuuya's throat. That, and some unwanted, *unlawful* images. Of Dazai. Of Dazai and —

"Chuuya."

"Huh?"

"Where is Atsushi right now?"

After a fair share of calls and some yelling, Chuuya and Dazai find out that Atsushi, thankfully, is safe and sound with Akutagawa, although the latter was planning to go out just this minute.

"Stay inside the headquarters," Chuuya tells him. "Don't let Atsushi out of your sight."

"I don't like doing nothing," Akutagawa mutters on the other end of the line.

"And I don't care. Work on your mentor skills or something."

Hanging up, Chuuya turns to Dazai, who is sitting on the edge of the bathtub with a towel around his hips and one on his head, which still leaves lots of skin that does not affect Chuuya's ability to think at all. Nope.

"They're safe," he says, leaning against the sink and crossing his arms over his chest. "For now."

"If I'm right — and I usually am — it will be some kind of teleportation ability. Perhaps a dimensional room. Have you ever heard of something like that?"

"I've heard of all kinds of abilities." Chuuya lets out a sigh. "Since we're talking about the guild here, they're bound to have some pretty useful ones, especially if they want Atsushi."

"What do you think they want him for?"

"Beats me."

"I read somewhere that tiger teeth are supposed to be pretty valuable," Dazai jokes with a faint grin on his lips. Forehead, all but naked, he looks a little funny — that kind of funny that makes Chuuya's heart flutter weirdly inside his chest. You know, *that* one.

Chuuya curls his fingers into fists to stop that train of thought. Not now, and not ever. Hasn't he already endangered Dazai enough *without* dragging him head-first into a relationship, too? Not to mention whether Dazai would even feel the same. He's here, yeah, and Chuuya has no doubts that Dazai likes him as a person but anything

more than that?

Not safe.

"They're already wealthy enough," he replies and shakes his head in deep thought. "It's gotta be something else. But —" Pushing away from the sink, he adds, "that's not your job to figure out so turn around. I still need to blow-dry your hair."

Dazai doesn't move. He just sheepishly looks from his hands to Chuuya, clearly wanting to say something — or instead wanting Chuuya to guess what he wants to say so he doesn't have to utter it.

Chuuya's not a mind reader, but he can try himself at guessing. "Bandages?"

"Yes. No. It depends?"

"On what?"

"I usually spend some time without them. When you're not here, and Oda is busy writing. Do you mind if I… don't put them on?"

Why is that even a damn question?

"Dazai," Chuuya says, grabbing the hairdryer that's hanging on the wall and plugging it into a socket, "do whatever the hell you want, and *yeah*, you should give your skin the chance the breathe more often than that."

"It's unsightly, though," he hears Dazai say behind him. "Not everyone wants to see that."

"I think you're forgetting who you're talking to sometimes. I've seen things over the years. Nasty things. In the end, a body's a body, though, whether there are scars or not."

Dazai shivers slightly when Chuuya nudges him to sit facing the door, so he has room to work. "*You* don't have scars."

We attack you from outside your periphery when your guard is completely down. That way, you won't have time to use gravity. Right, Chuuya?

Pushing down the vivid warmth of the cold sun on that day, the smell of the ocean behind him, Chuuya drives his fingers through Dazai's hair to loosen it up a bit. "Not ones that you have seen. I have plenty."

"Hey, Chuuya. Remember that free wish I have?"

"Hmh?"

"When I brought you the oil from the pantry."

"You're not seriously about to ask for something for *that*?"

"A promise is a promise."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "What could you possibly want?"

"I want to see your scars," Dazai says shamelessly. "And the stories behind them, too."

Chuuya's mild irritation bleeds into a surprised frown, though before he can even come up with a reply, he hears the shrill buzzing of his doorbell.

"Now what," he mutters with a sigh as he puts the hairdryer away.

"Guests?" Dazai muses. "Oh, will I meet more of your mafia friends? Akutagawa wasn't very talkative. I want someone who will tell me everything about you!"

Chuuya doesn't get unexpected visitors. Ever. Mostly because his address is not known to many people in town. That can only mean it's Akutagawa again, and that is not good.

"I'll see who it is," Chuuya says, not bothering to tell Dazai to stay here because the idiot never listens anyway.

Oda's in the hallway, giving Chuuya a hooded, silent look. On-standby.

Chuuya opens the door, but the person behind it is not Akutagawa. It's someone familiar but also someone he certainly did *not* expect to see tonight.

"Hey darling," Yosano Akiko says, looking as marvelous as ever with a chic, sleek-black suitcase by her side. "Remember all the times I saved your ass? Well, now would be the time to repay me. I'm in a little bit of trouble."

Chapter End Notes

... hope you enjoyed this as much as i enjoyed writing it <3

next up we have: a story, tension, more tension, and a mistake!

also dear user run_mello drew dazai from a scene last chapter so please check it out and gib them love because it's so FUCKING CUTE AND PRETTY AND PERFECT

Chapter 8: The a Russian Mafia Boss Wants To Kill Me Kind of Trouble

Chapter Notes

content warnings:
- mention of scars from a suicide attempt
- (solo) explicit sexual content towards the middle

(btw peep the new chapter count)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey darling," Yosano Akiko says, looking as marvelous as ever with a chic, sleek-black suitcase by her side. "Remember all the times I saved your ass? Well, now would be the time to repay me. I'm in a little bit of trouble."

“Trouble?” Chuuya asks. “What did you do?”

Yosano lets her fingers, armed with long acrylic nails, tap against her arm. “It’s rude to keep your friends waiting in the hallway.”

“Right. Right.” Chuuya steps aside to let her in, closing the door behind him and barely missing the mark to make introductions.

Yosano is much faster.

“Oh, and who is *this?”* Her head swivels back to shoot Chuuya a meaningful look. What exactly it says, he is not sure. Probably something like: *why are you hiding this sexy giant in your apartment, and why haven’t I heard about it?* “Chuuya-kun, is this another one of your strays, or did someone snatch you before I could?”

“That’s not Chuuya’s boyfriend,” someone says, coming around the corner. Not someone. *Dazai.* “That’s my bodyguard.” And Chuuya really can’t tell whether the edge of irritation in his voice comes from Yosano talking about Oda or about Chuuya.

(He certainly doesn’t hope it was the latter either. Nope.)

“Sakunosuke Oda,” Oda introduces himself, offering his hand. The way Yosano takes it and lets her gaze appreciatively wander over his frame and height can only be described as a predator seizing up its prey. It looks like *someone else* is about to be in trouble. “Dazai’s right.

I work as his bodyguard."

"Well, it's lovely to meet you, and you —" She turns to give Dazai a blinding smile. "Look at you! C'mon, let me hug you."

Dazai tentatively steps into her arms and lets her pull him into her chest, all but smothering him. Chuuya would feel a little bad if he didn't do the same every single day. But can you blame them when Dazai's cheeks flush with an adorable peach-colored blush as he dutifully hugs her back?

"Chuuya darling," Yosano says once she has finished torturing Dazai, "I had no idea you have so many friends!"

"Gee, thank you."

"Just kidding. You've always been a beautiful little social butterfly." Last but not least, she kisses his cheek in greeting before giving him a hug as well.

"As happy as I am to see you," Chuuya says, cocking his head when she steps away. "What trouble are we talking about?"

If this wasn't Yosano, he'd describe the little laugh she lets out as nervous. As it is, it's probably just something to stall the conversation. "The *a Russian mafia boss wants to kill me* kind of trouble," she says, placing one hand on her hip. "Something we should definitely discuss over wine. Don't you agree?"

That's how the four of them all end up in the dining room, a bottle of Lumiére in the center of the table as Yosano tells them about the past two months of her life.

It started with a one-time job offer from one of her street contacts that approached her: spend a night with a man named Fyodor Dostoevsky – a Russian baron coming to Yokohama for a business trip — leave a special electronic device on his suitcase, get *filthy rich*.

"For someone who saves lives, I don't nearly make enough money," Yosano says with a careless shrug. "And seven million yen for that cinch? Of course, I was interested. Plus, Dostoevsky was hot in that I-haven't-slept-in-ten-years kind of way."

"Oh, I know what you mean," Chuuya agrees with an enthusiastic hum. "That's my type too."

He doesn't see the way Dazai's fingers curl around themselves under the table.

After taking a sip of wine, Yosano continues, "I obviously did my research, but as it turns out, mafia bosses are excellent at erasing their fingerprints. So I took the job thinking he was just rich. Not a crime boss."

"It didn't go as planned?" Chuuya guesses.

"No, it went perfectly," she says, clicking her tongue. "We had a lovely time together. Good food. A fancy suite. Hot, nasty sex. You know what I'm talking about?"

Chuuya shoots her a look. "Yeah, I know what sex is. What happened then?"

"Well, I left the device on his suitcase as instructed and even let him pay for my cab home. Except that when I was supposed to meet my person to get my money, the poor guy was almost dead. Luckily for him, I'm good at reviving people. He told me that the people who ordered the job in the first place messed up and that the assassination attempt didn't go as planned. Unfortunately for the guy, Dostoevsky's people shot him right after I revived him." She makes a face. "I barely got away from those Russian clowns. I'm pretty sure my apartment is being ransacked as we speak, and, worst of all, I never even got the money. Can you believe this? All this fanfare and I come out of it broke."

"Wow," Chuuya ends up saying before taking another sip of his wine and letting out a long breath. "You weren't followed?"

"I wasn't. I made one stupid mistake, but that's the exception, not the rule."

"Good." Chuuya nods. "That's good."

"So I can stay here as I figure out how to get my life back?" Yosano not so much asks but proposes.

"Of course. We even got a new room ready…" Chuuya bites his cheek as he turns to shoot Dazai a smirk. "You up for another few nights of being roommates?"

Dazai wordlessly grabs the bottle and drinks out of it.

That sure is an answer.

They spend some time throwing ideas to get rid of Dostoevsky into the room before it gets pretty late, and Oda excuses himself to go to sleep. Dazai gets up, too, though he lingers in the kitchen and plays around with the stove settings until Yosano announces that she's going to go outside for a cigarette.

"By this time next week, Chuuya will be running a hotel," Dazai says when the door that leads to the patio slides shut.

"Tell me about it." Chuuya lets out a snort as he leans his hip against the stove. "I didn't expect this turn of events either. You don't mind that she took your room, do you?" He glances up to find the truth. "Because if so, I'm sure I can share the bed with Yosano instead."

"Chuuya is so stupid. Besides… what would I do without the sound of your snoring lulling me to sleep?"

Letting that comment slide, for now, Chuuya raises his brows. "What is it then?"

"My hair."

"... is dry."

Dazai crosses his arms.

"I'll do it some other time," Chuuya promises, and without really thinking about it, he lifts a hand to tuck some of Dazai's hair behind his ear. Chuuya has to admit, he is a big fan of that look on him. An even bigger fan of his audible inhale. "Promise."

"Chuuya's promises are piling up," Dazai tells him before pushing away from the stove and heading out of the kitchen, leaving Chuuya and his thoughts alone.

The scars thing.

Right.

He's still frowning when he grabs the bottle of wine and glasses and joins Yosano on the patio outside, fingers curled around a cigarette as she sits on the canopy swing and gazes over the distant city lights.

"Enjoying the view?" Chuuya asks, settling down next to her and grabbing the pack of cigarettes that's lying on the table.

“I could get used to it.”

“Well, until we figure out what to do about Dostoevsky, you can.”

Yosano tilts her head towards him with a rare smile on her face. “Thank you, Chuuya-kun. Really. I’m confident that there is a solution out there, but for a moment yesterday, the situation was looking rather dreary.”

“Hey.” Chuuya places his hand over hers between them and giving it a squeeze. “This is the least I can do after all the times you saved my ass.”

Yosano hums in agreement. “Don’t forget all the times you interrupted my beauty sleep.”

Chuuya grins to himself. “Of course. How could I leave out the most important thing of all?”

“So, I see your boy is still here,” she says then because, of course, that topic would come up eventually. “Not only in your life but in your apartment. Permanently.”

“Still not my boy.” Lighting his cigarette, he takes a deep drag before exhaling the smoke quietly. “But yes. Things are getting complicated at work, and I figured he’d be safer here than in some run-down dorm room on the other side of the city.”

“If he’s not your boy, whose is he?”

Chuuya shoots her a look. “No one’s. Dazai’s just Dazai, and that’s fine.”

“*Denial* can be such an agonizingly blinding thing,” Yosano groans out dramatically.

“I’m *not* in denial!”

“Please, I saw the way you look at him. You’d probably burn down the entire city just to keep him safe.”

“Of course, I would. Isn’t that what everyone would do for people they care about?”

The look Yosano slides his way is quite insulting, to be honest.

“I’m not in denial,” Chuuya murmurs. “Really. I’m just…” He shrugs.

“Things could get ugly. For both of us.”

“Since when does Nakahara Chuuya let anything stop him from getting what he wants?”

“Since I joined the mafia and all my friends died?” Chuuya replies weakly. It’s supposed to be a joke. It is. But what is a joke, if not a miserable attempt to twist reality into something more bearable? Chuuya did almost lose the sheep. The flags did die. The detective that just wanted to help him out of the mafia’s darkness did get killed on Verlaine’s quest for Chuuya. Everyone he loves… everyone he cares becomes collateral damage at some point.

And he can’t let Dazai become just another name in Chuuya’s list of people he wishes he could have saved.

He can’t.

“Hey,” Yosano’s voice says next to him. “Friends or lovers — whatever you think is going to happen to him won’t care whether Dazai was only a friend or something more, and trust me, darling, you will regret that you kept him at a healthy distance instead of using all the time you could have.”

“You know, that’s not giving me much hope, Akiko-san.”

“I’m not here to give you hope but to kick your ass into action,” she huffs. “Some people are destined to be in your life. How did you say you two met?”

“He broke into my apartment… when he was drunk.”

“That’s not a coincidence. That’s fate. Same as me showing up on your doorstep while you’re harboring the second most-handsome redhead known to mankind behind locked doors.” Eyes falling shut, Chuuya lets his head drop back and laugh. “Is he single, by the way?”

“He hasn’t mentioned anyone else.”

“Excellent. You don’t mind a little noise, do you?”

“I do, actually. I need my fucking sleep for work, or I promise you’ll get a taste of my fifteen-year-old anger issues again.”

Yosano only laughs. “You should be happy. Maybe *that* will bring some sense into you and your boy. And some sex.”

“I hate you.”

She leans her head against his shoulder. “You *love* me.”

He does.

“Good job,” Mori says, sidling up to him so that the two of them can watch as two of their guys escort the ability user, Lucy Montgomery, out of the lobby and into the infamous basement. “I’m sure the guild will retaliate, but for now, Atsushi Nakajima is safe.”

“Yeah.” Fishing out his pack of cigarettes, Chuuya picks one out and slides it between his lips before lighting it. “Boss, do we know what they want with him?” Because if they do, this entire shit scenario would be so much easier.

“What every person in this world wants. Power.”

“The ability is good, I can see that, but the kid? He’s an anxious mess, and an ability is only so good without the proper skills to control it.”

Mori smiles mysteriously before nodding at the dent in the curbstone. “It was a marvelous catch, realizing that an ability was in play. How did you figure it out?”

Because a certain college student living in his apartment told him.

“Because I know my subordinates,” is what he says instead. A half-truth. Half-truths are good. “I’d know if two of them were planning to leave.”

Whether Mori believes him or simply finds his poker face and effort to hide Dazai amusing, Chuuya doesn’t know. It’s a thin line that he’s walking, but hey, the reward is… everything.

Things at home are chaotic.

Living with Dazai and Oda was pretty simple. That with Yosano in the mix? Slightly more crowded, ten times more flirting, more sexual innuendos, and a shit ton more tension because Yosano has opinions, and she will stop at nothing to voice them.

Not to mention that Chuuya is 100% more stressed every time he comes home and it’s too quiet... like right now.

If that Dostoevsky guy finds Yosano, Dazai and Oda are right behind her. And Chuuya would rather he does not. His own organization and one from the west being a risk to them is already more than enough.

A peek at his watch reveals that it's one in the morning already, so the easy silence at home is normal. Oda has an insanely good sleeping schedule, Yosano insists on getting enough beauty rest, and Dazai's probably in bed by now too.

But when Chuuya enters his bedroom, Dazai's in bed reading a book. His bangs are tied into a tiny ponytail that looks like a palm tree.

"Hey," he says, fingers already working on undoing the buttons on his vest. "I thought you'd be asleep by now."

"Neh. I tried to, but…" Dazai swirls his finger around itself. "... I couldn't. My brain is being annoying."

Chuuya's glad he is facing his closet right now because his cheeks hurt from the strain it takes to keep his goofy smile at bay. It's not his brain but his stupid, big heart that's being annoying as well. "Maybe I can help with that."

Dazai's "oh?" sounds a little breathy.

Chuuya frowns to himself. "My snoring, remember? You always insist that it's like white noise and that it helps you sleep?"

"Oh," comes again from behind him. All flatness. No smoke. "That."

"Yeah that."

"Chuuya."

"Hm?"

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

His button-up shirt now all but open, Chuuya swivels around to see what the fuck Dazais is on about. "What do you mean?"

"My free wish," Dazai says, drawing his knees up. "The one I told you about before Yosano rang the doorbell and stole *my* moment?"

"Oh." Chuuya's lips part. "You were serious about that?"

Dazai makes a few dozen indecipherable noises in the back of his

throat in reply. “When have I ever been *not* serious about something?”

“Like all the time?” Chuuya answers dryly and then sighs to avoid another ten minutes of bickering that would lead eventually to the same outcome, just like if they decide to forgo it. It’s been a long day. All he wants to do is curl up in his bed and pass out. “All right. If you’re that serious about copping a feel of me.” Shirt shrugged off and tossed on the floor, Chuuya approaches the bed until his wades hit the edge and nods at Dazai to come over. “Go ahead.”

“I’m not trying to fondle you,” Dazai grumbles, even if he’s already gracelessly crawling over the bed before sitting down in a kneeling position right in front of him. “I just want a look.”

“Here.” Chuuya drives his fingers across the scar below his ribs, deceptive in its neatness, just like he does so many times when he’s lying awake at night and wondering about a future that will never happen anymore.

Or, so he thought.

He’s not alone anymore, after all.

Dazai is in front of him and looking at the memory-shaped wound with a gaze that does not falter. “What happened?” he demands.

“I got stabbed.” The look he receives is a wordless *go on*, so biting his lip, Chuuya does. “It was a… a friend. He thought that I was going to betray him and the people he cares about because I worked with the mafia, so he stabbed me with a poisoned knife.”

“I don’t know much about friendships,” Dazai says, lifting his eyes to meet Chuuya’s, “but that does not sound very friendly to me.”

Chuuya only shrugs. At that time, he thought the same thing, the same mantra of *how could they have done this to me?* over and over, but in hindsight —

The sheep were children. They were scared. And they played right into Mori’s hands when they decided to team up with the GSS to take out the mafia and Chuuya.

That doesn’t mean the wound is healed. It probably never will be entirely.

“What about this one?” Dazai asks, lifting his hand to let it ghost over

a scar above his left hipbone.

“Courtesy of an ability user that used frisbees as bullets.”

Accepting that, Dazai moves on. His fingers travel higher to the crook of his elbow and the three jagged, diagonal scars across the skin.

“Claws,” Chuuya provides.

Dazai’s brows raise. “I thought Atsushi only appeared a few weeks ago.”

“Not a tiger’s. Human claws.”

“That’s possible?”

“If someone really wants to,” Chuuya says quietly, “yes.”

Dazai must sense his unwillingness to talk about that, so he wanders even higher on the map of scars and stories. To his neck and the tiny number tattooed there — one that’s usually hidden by his choker, the collar of his shirt, or his hair.

“That’s not a scar.”

“Still a story,” Dazai points out.

“And you deserve to hear it?” Taking that curious, noisy hand, Chuuya presses it back against Dazai’s chest, secretly enjoying the light shiver he feels run through his body. “Do you really think getting some damn oil out of the pantry is enough to deserve hearing all this?”

“If not, why did you agree to it in the first place?”

And isn’t this the question of all questions?

Why let Dazai get away with everything he does? Why invite him into his life instead of kicking him out once and for all because he’s a *civilian,* a *nuisance*, and a *liability,* and because Chuuya has no place in his life for those? Why ask him to move in? Why wash his hair and buy him clothes and break his back only to see that crooked grin on Dazai’s face?

The answer is more simple than one might think. The implications of it, however, are *disastrous.*

And that’s why the answer has no damn space to be here.

And that's why Chuuya says, "because you're a brat who would have thrown a temper tantrum if I hadn't."

"You mean to tell me that a mafia executive can't handle a little bitching?"

Chuuya's well aware that they never stopped touching, content with it since he takes a shameless kind of pleasure from feeling the light tremors against his own skin, but he only really pays attention to it when Dazai starts pushing back against his hand. Considering the pretty much zero strength in his skinny noodle arms, and they both know that Chuuya's the stronger one out of the two, it's a *bold* fucking move.

"Oh, I can. I just don't want to."

Chuuya easily crushes his piss-poor attempt at it and shoves him back until Dazai gives in — faster than expected actually — and lets Chuuya wrestle him down until he's pinned to the bed.

"So, is that what you do with brats?" Dazai asks, eyes huge like the sparkling sea of the french riviera in the afternoon sun. Chuuya would reply if only Dazai didn't look like he was in the exact position that he wanted to be in right now. As if he… planned this all along.

Chuuya half-naked above him. Dazai smug and happy underneath.

"Dazai," Chuuya warns. His knee is between his thighs, dangerously close to his crotch but still a few *safe* inches away.

"What?" Dazai asks, batting his lashes innocently. "You're the one pinning me down like a caveman."

"Don't act like your bastard brain doesn't predict every little action and word."

"Me?" Dazai coyly tilts his head and gives him a stunning view of his neck, no bandages, only creamy-pale skin that hasn't seen the sunlight in a while, and the blurry, thick outline of what must have been a strick once upon a time. Chuuya can practically feel the taste of his delicate skin on his tongue. With his hair a little ruffled, spread out on the bed around him, he looks like all of Chuuya's daydreams have stepped out of his head and broken into his home. "I am just a poor, innocent student who needs to be protected and sheltered all the time." His free hand wraps around Chuuya's wrist, thumb slowly massaging circles into the skin. "Isn't that right, Chuuya ~?"

“You,” Chuuya breathes, “are —”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“You better be decent!” Yosano’s voice calls from outside, and, of course, she doesn’t even wait a single second before yanking the door open. “Who am I kidding. There’s nothing you guys have that I haven’t —”

Chuuya doesn’t exactly *jump away.* He’s twenty-one years old and not a fucking teenager who got caught making out with his crush, *but.* Letting go of Dazai, he does sit back on his knees to shoot Yosano a nasty look.

“— seen,” she finally finishes. The coy smile on her face is a flash of victory. “You know, when I said that, I didn’t think I’d actually catch you in the act. *Hoped,* yes, but not —”

“You didn’t catch us doing anything. We were sharing… *stories,*” Chuuya mutters as he crawls away from Dazai, who is bracing himself up with his elbows while silently following the entire conversation. Chuuya’s stomach falls and tumbles, but he tells himself it’s not because of what might or might not have happened if Yosano hadn’t barged in here like —. “What do you want?”

“Well,” Yosano says and joins them on the bed. “I was thinking about ways to get Dostoevsky off my back without having to change my identity and lay low for the next ten years, and I wanted to have a professional opinion on it.”

This time, Chuuya doesn’t get distracted in the process of undressing.

“The guy who offered me the job is dead, but the people who ordered sent him are still out there.”

“Most likely.”

“So I’m thinking instead of running, I could help him.”

Chuuya feels his mouth flatten as he finally slips into the bed and next to Yosano because she made herself comfortable between the two of them — Dazai, still, suspiciously mute. “You really wanna get involved with a Russian mafia boss?”

“Honey, I’m already twelve feet deep into this,” Yosano huffs before holding up her hand in something akin to a confession. “All right, it

was only eight inches. *Still."*

And, of course, *that's* the moment Dazai chooses to finally insert himself into the conversation. "You're trans?"

"Oh, no, but I'm no animal. I own a strap-on. More than one."

"Of course not," Dazai agrees casually. "Who doesn't own a strap-on?"

"Enough strap-on talk," Chuuya cuts in before this conversation can derail any further.

"As I was saying, I'm already deep enough as it is, so I might as well carve out myself a place on his throne. *Besides,* Chuuya-kun, you really have no business talking about getting involved with a mafia boss. Right, Dazai-kun?"

"I wouldn't know anything about Chuuya and inches," the fucking shithead retorts, "but *yes,* I am the living proof that getting involved with filthy-rich men working in organized crime is nothing but fruitful. Lots of free clothes."

"I did that *once."* Chuuya crosses his arms. "And I was drunk."

"He washes my hair."

Chuuya really doesn't have any good excuses for that, so he simply chooses to glare at the air instead.

"I'm happy that your relationship seems to be moving forward," Yosano says, "or that you're at least willing to talk about it, but can we focus on *me?* Dostoevsky? The bright-red target on the back of my head?"

"What will you do once you settled your score with him?" Dazai asks. For once, Chuuya agrees with the question. "Someone of that caliber won't let you just walk."

"And he's Russian," Chuuya adds. "So he'll be returning there at some point, and no offense, I'm sure you'd look fabulous in an ushanka, but I'd much rather have you stay here."

Yosano drums her fingernails against her thigh for a moment, considering. "Would life as a mafia boss sugar baby be *that* bad?"

"Akiko-san," Chuuya says.

"No," Dazai says. "It actually sounds good."

Chuuya pushes away from the bedframe to shoot Dazai a scowl. However, that only earns him a goofy, careless grin in reply. "It *doesn't* sound good. You don't even know the damn guy."

"That's the whole point of being a sugar baby. I don't have to."

"But —"

"Relax. As much as I'd like to spend my days getting paid for looking good and railing Russian men, I do have a life here and a career, and I'm not cut out for -40 degrees every winter." She shakes her head dramatically. "Oh, yeah, and I have you."

"Thanks for including us," Chuuya says dryly.

"You're welcome," Yosano says before draping up one knee and folding her fingers around it. "I'm sure I will come up with something. How hard can it be to put off a Russian mafia boss?"

"Definitely not as hard as getting rid of Dazai," Chuuya jokes before a yawn cuts him off, and he sinks deeper into the bed.

Yosano must take that as her cue to leave as she stretches out her hands and gives each of them a brilliant smile. "I appreciate all your input and will put it into consideration. We should do this more often."

"Next time, *wait* after knocking," Chuuya calls after her, but Yosano has already closed the door and — "She left the damn light on." That problem, however, only requires him to clap his hands together two times and say, "Sophie, lights out."

"You named your light system *Sophie*?"

"Yeah. You know, after —"

"— *howl's moving castle.* Chuuya is such a *nerd*."

Chuuya can't find it in even himself to react to that insult because the darkness, as well as the silence that descends over the room, is thick with all the tension that built up before they were interrupted. Tension that never *left.*

Closing his eyes and trying to sleep doesn't help either because as soon as he does, he sees Dazai under him again, all messy hair, hooded

grins, and pale skin. He sees Dazai's neck and Chuuya leaning down to press his lips against it. The kisses would be slow and phantom-touches, at first, because Dazai is sensitive, but that would make it even more fun. Every little hint of tongue or graze of teeth would make him twitch and shudder in o—

"Chuuya?"

His mouth presses closer in near-painful embarrassment as Chuuya wills his breathing to calm down. "Yeah?" It sounds raspy.

"... good night."

Rolling over to his side, Chuuya's stomach clenches and unclenches rapidly. This is awful, terrible torture.

For once in his life, he hopes someone at work fucks up, so he has an excuse to leave. Because lying here next to Dazai and doing nothing sucks. It really does.

"Night."

Chuuya's phone doesn't ring with an emergency meeting, but his own body takes care of waking him up all by itself. With a fucking dream. One that he gets so into that Chuuya must realize he's still in the same damn bed with the person he's dreaming about so that he ends up startling awake.

The only plus side to it is that Dazai is, at least, still sleeping, his mouth slightly parted while his head faces Chuuya in a direction that will probably cause him annoying neck pain later.

Everything else is a downside. Chuuya's still worked up, and Dazai's here, looking all pretty and sleepy, and Chuuya feels like a fucking creep having these thoughts while he's passed out — and *that's* saying something with all the things he's already tried out in bed.

This entire thing is fucking ridiculous anyway, Chuuya thinks as he slides out of bed and stomps to the nearest bathroom because he knows sexual attraction. He knows what to do with it. You flirt a bit, you grab a drink, and you land in bed. If it's a match, you repeat it a few times. *Easy.* Despite working together and seeing each other nearly every day, Chuuya has managed to have casual hookups with Tachihara just fine. This thing with Dazai, though —

At the risk of sounding cliche, it's *different.*

Dazai is Dazai. He laughs when he's not supposed to do, he gets delighted about fake skirts, and he sneezes when the curry Oda makes is too spicy. *Dazai is different.* And as much as Chuuya would die right now to strip him off all his masks with pleasure, witness the thing underneath, he doesn't want it to be a one-time get-it-out-of-their-system-thing, he doesn't want something casual either. What he wants is…

On the tip of his tongue, and he's not going to finish that thought.

Chuuya all but wrestles his briefs off before stepping under the shower. For a few moments, he lets the water pelt down against his skin, hoping that it will clear some of the hazy fog in his brain. It does, but the tension is still alive and well, buzzing through his veins like liquid electricity.

Just to take the edge off, he thinks as he wraps his hand around his dick with a soft hiss, stroking himself to full hardness in no time.

He has no idea when he actually last jerked off in a fucking shower — a thing that he left behind in his teenage years and as soon as he got his own place. Standing upright the whole time is annoying. The water is the opposite of good lubrication. And Chuuya usually prefers to take his time, pay attention to his prostate when he plays with himself. *But…* desperate times call for desperate measures.

Eyes squeezing shut, Chuuya focuses on the warm curl of pleasure that builds in his spine with every up-stroke and on the way his mouth parts as his hips buck into his own fist.

It's not enough, though.

Simply touching himself is not enough.

"*Fuck*," he mutters and picks up the pace. This wan't supposed to be a long session, but he can't help the vivid images that start flooding his brain.

Elegant hands.

Long, slender fingers.

A pink, glossy pair of lips that spend way too much talking bullshit and —

That mouth would look good around his dick.

Chuuya's not sure whether Dazai ever sucked someone off; for now, he decides that he hasn't, and what is Chuuya if not a wonderful teacher, huh? He would cup his pretty chin and part his mouth with his thumb and then —

His cock throbs painfully, but *finally,* that edge is insight.

Chuuya lets out a harsh breath as he focuses his hand on the head, flicking his wrist with every stroke just like Dazai would when —

"Chuuyaaaaa ~!"

Eyes snapping open, Chuuya stills. Are his fantasies starting to sound startlingly accurate, or was this —

"Chuuya?"

Oh, shit. Dazai was still sleeping when Chuuya left the room. How is he already awake *and* in front of the damn bathroom?

"*What?"* he makes himself say, sounding way more irritated even for his usual self.

There is a suspicious silence outside the bathroom, making Chuuya's hand tighten around his dick, not weak enough to continue but not quite strong enough to abandon his mission either — which would be *hard,* literally, anyway.

"What are you doing?" Dazai asks.

"Jesus, fuck," Chuuya mutters under his breath before replying. "Taking a damn shower. What do you think?!"

"Well, your phone is ringing."

Sighing, Chuuya shakes his head. "So let it ring."

"But you never let it ring!" Dazai insists.

"I'M TAKING A FUCKING SHOWER!" it breaks out of Chuuya and he has to blink at himself, not having quite expected the volume. "Now, leave me alone!"

Instead, he hears another voice.

"Why are you arguing with the door?"

Yosano.

"Chuuya is too busy showering to answer his work calls…"

There's muffled snickering and then *nothing.*

Chuuya should be relieved. However, he ends up being fucking *paranoid* because he wouldn't put it past Dazai to wait in front of the door until Chuuya comes out, and despite all the walls that separate them right now, jerking off with Dazai *right there* feels criminal and frankly, frustrating.

But there's no way Chuuya can go out there with a fucking boner, so he takes a deep breath, starts stroking himself, and pulls up every trick in the book that makes his veins flush hot and doesn't stop until he finally feels himself twitch and come with a breathless groan.

It's a shitty fucking orgasm.

Some of the pressure in his guts melts away with the streaks of jizz that dribble down his fist. Nearly not as much as he truly needed. Definitely not as much as it would have if Dazai hadn't fucking interrupted him in the middle of it. The coil inside him lingers, making him feel like he needs more when he knows that would take way too much time than he currently has.

Chuuya makes quick work of washing his hair and his body then turns off the shower and steps out to towel himself dry, all while feeling like he needs the day to come to an end already — even if it's only begun.

Thankfully, Dazai is *not* waiting for him outside when Chuuya comes out with only a towel around his hips, hair messy and wet. On the way to the bedroom, he meets Oda with a cup of coffee in his hands, so he makes a detour to the kitchen to grab his own liquid heroin before tending to the missed call.

"Morning sunshine," Yosano greets him leaning against the kitchen island, Dazai right across from her at the table. "Sleep well?"

Chuuya scowls as he heads straight for his precious baby — the coffee machine. "Since when are you two early risers?"

"Oh, someone's grumpy," she comments.

"Maybe you showered for too long," Dazai points out ever so helpfully. "Too much *heat* on an empty stomach isn't good."

He hears Yosano chuckle behind him. "You should start showering *with* people. Save heat *and* water."

Chuuya closes his eyes. *He is an island.* No one — not even his annoying, noisy friends that have no perception of boundaries *whatsoever* — can touch him.

"If only there was someone willing to do it with Chuuya…" Dazai says with a loud sigh.

Nope.

"Yosano," Chuuya snaps, spinning around with a cold threat in the shape of a smile. "I'm pretty sure Oda was asking for you right now. Why don't you see and find out what he wants?"

"Ah. Of course." Yosano's eyes shine with amusement as she claps Dazai's bandaged shoulder in parting before idly waltzing out of the kitchen and leaving the two of them alone.

For all the space in Chuuya's penthouse, his kitchen feels decidedly small.

But that's okay.

"Hey." Taking his cup of coffee, he turns to look at Dazai. "What do you think about going to see a movie tonight? Just the two of us?"

It's been a crowded few weeks. If even Chuuya is starting to feel its effects, then Dazai sure as hell must be feeling them too. And… something has to fucking give. Maybe they can talk. Or maybe Yosano was right, and Chuuya's too deep in this anyway, so he might as well put his entire heart into it. Who the hell knows.

That is if Dazai even wants to do the same.

Chuuya tries to offer him a relaxed grin even though he's pretty sure it comes out crooked and awkward. "What do you say?"

"I was going to go to the library with Odasaku," Dazai replies, glancing at the patio outside before looking back at Chuuya, "and Yosano-san wanted to try out this recipe."

Right.

"I feel like I've seen enough movies anyway," Dazai adds as if his previous words haven't stuck already. "I'm getting bored of it."

Chuuya nods. "Okay. Yeah, that's okay."

"Is Chuuya all right?"

"Peachy," he mutters and pushes away from the counter to leave. "See you tonight, yeah?"

"Don't kill too many innocent people ~."

Just… peachy.

It's one of those days.

Murphy's law, Akutagawa would whisper ominously once again.

Not even fifteen minutes into the night, Chuuya gets the call that one of their warehouses is on fire.

Now, two hours, three rogue ability users that are surprisingly skilled yet expectedly stupid to attack the mafia in the first place, and a hundred stray bullets whizzing past later, Chuuya's keeping a young man with a buzz cut and a gold tooth pinned to the ground, not intending to let him go any time soon. His subordinates have the other two, so now they only need to bring them for questioning, make sure it's an isolated incident and not part of the guild's scheme. That —

Something hits the side of his face. Sharp and shocking pain, one that he hasn't felt in a hot while, flares through his bones and muscles, and with a hiss, Chuuya makes sure the guy doesn't use this moment to escape, red light outlining his body before he gets pushed into the floor once again.

"What the hell," Chuuya mutters and scowls in the direction where the block of cement that just fucking sucker-punched him came from.

One of his subordinates, Handa, who's been trying to put on ability-weakening handcuffs on the girl in her grip — an ability user with the power of catapulting whatever she touches, it seems — offers him an apologetic bow a few feet away. "Sorry, Nakahara-san!"

Chuuya doesn't bother yelling. It was his own fault, after all.

Usually, whenever he's out in the field — hell, whenever he's simply

outside his own four walls, his ability is one whisper away, *always* on guard so that even if a comet falls from the sky and Chuuya doesn't see it coming, for the tainted sorrow will still protect him.

But today, he’s not100% focused. He’s distracted. Irritated and on edge.

And he knows exactly what is to blame for that.

"Ayo, you all right?" Tachihara says after jogging up to him, a few lines of genuine concern drawn on his features.

But maybe Chuuya's solution just walked up to him. Well, temporary solution, at least.

"I'm fine," he says, lifting his fingers to his headpiece. "Round 'em up and get them to the dungeons. I already notified the interrogation unit. And send a clean-up crew to take care of this damn mess."

As his team gets to work, Chuuya turns to his new mission for tonight. Tachihara. Somewhere in the last few hours, the black lizard team got sent over here, which Chuuya doesn't appreciate. He had it under control even when it did take him a tiny bit longer than it usually would. But right now, that doesn't matter anymore.

"Are you free?" Chuuya asks him.

Tachihara's frown bleeds into a smirk as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jacket and shrugs nonchalantly. "Depends. What for?"

"A few drinks. Help me get cleaned up?" For the tainted sorrow — or maybe the slumbering beast inside him — do a good job of healing stubborn injuries in record time, but Chuuya can feel warm blood on his face and a swelling headache. He'll have to do things the normal way for now.

The gleam in Tachihara's eyes is an unmistakable *hell yeah.*

Chuuya's driver takes them to *the Dragon’s Den*, one of the mafia-affiliated bars. Discrete setting, customers that mind their own business, strong drinks, and most importantly, a bathroom equipped with a first aid kit.

Tachihara helps him get the wound disinfected, then puts a pink bandaid on it and kisses him.

His hair is too short, not enough to drive his fingers through it, and even though Chuuya never minded before, he feels his stomach lock in dim disappointment. But hey, Tachihara's a great kisser, good with his hands too, and they've done this enough time that the night promises more than one orgasm and finally some relief of tension.

"Your place or mine?" Tachihara murmurs against his mouth.

Chuuya pulls away to roll his eyes and light a cigarette. "Yours. Mine's… sorta crowded."

Tachihara smirks. "You've never shied away from an audience before."

"Yeah, no, *that* crowd is not going to be happy." And when he realizes how shitty that sounds, Chuuya drives his fingers through his hair and lets out a sigh. "It's complicated."

"Complicated seems to be the theme lately," Tachihara says. "I can't wait for these American motherfuckers to fuck off to where they came from."

Chuuya throws him a grin over his shoulder before pushing open the door of the bathroom. “Tell me about it. After."

"Yes, sir."

It ends up being okay. Maybe not the best sex they ever had; they're both a little distracted, what with their phones going off every ten minutes, and after the first round, Chuuya's dick takes ages to get hard again even while Tachihara's mouth does a compelling job. But it's okay. Easy. Simple.

The clock says it's nearly five in the morning by the time they're done, and Chuuya involuntarily dozes off. He wakes up when Tachihara half-falls out of bed on his way to the bathroom. Chuuya takes it as his cue to go.

They almost stumble into each other in the hallway, the world outside barely beginning to brighten as the sun rises behind a cover of clouds. "Did I wake you?" Tachihara mumbles, stretching his arms over his head. "Sorry."

"It's fine." Shrugging, Chuuya slips into his boots. "Don't have time to sleep in anyway."

"Okay." Tachihara yawns. "Imma take another nap. See ya."

Not much later, Chuuya's outside and calling a driver — with his international phone because the other one died — to get him home.

For twenty entire minutes, life feels like it used to be. Before Dazai.

Long days at work, adrenaline-pumped conflicts, and the occasional nights spent with a warm body. It wasn't a bad life. Chuuya wouldn't have been able to lead it for so long if it was, but… in hindsight, it was empty. It lacked something specific that Chuuya didn't know even know he was missing until he got it. The feeling of resting his head against someone's shoulder as they read a book together. The sour taste of wine shared with friends on his patio. Waking up next to someone and having non-sensical, sleepy pillow talk. That flame inside him growing and blazing and burning with each word, each gesture, and each touch from that *one* person.

When the car comes to a stop in front of his building, he's not sure what that realization means. Whether it even changes anything. All he knows is that even though yesterday was a bad day, even though his friends were irritating, and Dazai's reply was not what he had hoped for, Chuuya's glad to come home to these people.

Unlocking the door to his apartment, Chuuya expects to find it dark and quiet. His friends might have surprisingly woke up at eight yesterday, but right now, it's barely half-past six, so there is no way —

"— told you, you should have called him."

Chuuya pauses in his foyer when he not only hears one but several voices coming from the living room, although the noise seems to quiet down as the door falls shut behind him. After tugging at the collar of his shirt and carding his fingers through his rumpled bed-hair in a last-minute attempt of making himself look like he didn't spend the last four hours fucking someone, he makes his way to the source of the noises.

The number of people in his apartment has once again grown since Akutagawa, Atsushi, and Higuchi are all spread out on his fucking floor like they're having a sleepover with the rest of the squad.

"Look who the cat dragged in," Dazai is the first one to drawl, and Chuuya feels like the way he plans his feet in Oda's lap is not an oddly-timed coincidence.

Yosano scans him from head to toe. "Rough night?"

"Yeah," Chuuya says, and that's not a lie. The new bruise blossoming on his right cheek is proof of that. "What's going on?"

"I called you," Akutagawa says. "Jinko problems."

Atsushi offers him a sheepish grin. "It's all right now. Dazai-san was a great help."

Chuuya lets his hands slide into the pocket of his pants. "Yeah, my phone died, but everything's fine now?"

The obvious answer is yes. If something else happened at work, Tachihara would have told him, and Akutagawa wouldn't be here having a tea party.

Chuuya waits for the other shoe to drop. His eyes slide over to Dazai and the hooded expression on his face.

"Everything’s great,” Dazai replies with a nonchalant jerk of his head, “but probably not as great as your night was by the looks of it. Who did you spend it with? Tachihara, right?”

Chuuya blinks.

Oh.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 9: Dumpster Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Everything's great," Dazai replies with a nonchalant jerk of his head, "but probably not as great as your night was by the looks of it. Who did you spend it with? Tachihara, right?"

Oh.

Chuuya's puzzled frown bleeds into a glare as he turns his head to Akutagawa. "You tattled on me?"

"I heard that you left together," Akutagawa says bluntly. "Was it supposed to be a secret?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "No, but you don't see me going around telling people what you're up to in your free time." Probably because Akutagawa is up to nothing with anybody in his free time, Chuuya's 99% sure the guy hasn't even had his first kiss yet, even if Higuchi would be the first one to volunteer herself as the guinea pig. "Whatever," he says, lifting his head in defeat, "you caught my walk of shame. Congratulations. We done?"

Oda clears his throat and avoids his gaze for some reason. Dazai, on the other hand, bends over backwards to snuggle closer to his bodyguard, pointedly refusing to look in Chuuya's direction.

Part of Chuuya is proud of his progress, considering three months ago, Dazai was barely able to touch his hand without flinching away as if struck by lightning. Another part… feels something cold and sharp flash in his stomach. He doesn't like the sight. Not at all.

"How about," Yosano gets to her feet, breaking the silence, "I make us some breakfast?"

"I will help," Oda says, but his attempt at getting up is cut off by Dazai's snug grip around his arm.

"No, Odasaku. Stay. I need *cuddles.*"

Chuuya crosses his arms.

“I feel some tension,” Akutagawa observes aloud.

“Senpai,” Higuchi whispers next to him, “maybe we should go.”

“Yeah, maybe you should,” Chuuya agrees.

“Oh no, don’t leave on my account,” Dazai quips, grinning as if his own words amuse him. “We’re having so much fun here. Right, Odasaku?”

Oda looks as pained by the thick air in the room as everyone else, especially since he seems to be the central piece in whatever game Dazai is playing right now. “I’d rather help Yosa—”

“You’re so funny! I could talk to you for hours.”

“You’d get bored.”

“Of you? Never.”

Chuuya knows it’s not real. It isn’t. Dazai’s friends with Oda; they sure have a special bond; maybe if this happened two months later — *okay*, but Dazai being this fucking annoying right after Chuuya came home from a Tachihara? After the last few weeks of teasing and comments? After everything they’ve been through? It’s an act, and it has one purpose only.

“Dazai,” he snaps. “Enough.”

“Enough?” Dazai parrots, clutching his chest. “Oh, Chuuya, we’re only *starting —”*

*“*We really should help out Yosano-san,” Atsushi says with a miserable expression on his face.

Higuchi nods furiously. “Or *leave.”*

“Yes,” Chuuya growls.

“No,” Dazai exclaims with an authoritative tone in his voice, one that Chuuya’s never heard before — and he can’t deny that he would really like it under other circumstances. “*Stay.”*

Chuuya shoots a glare into the room. “Everyone. Out. And not just out of the living room but out of my house until I fucking say that you can come back.” When everyone only stares at him: “NOW.”

The way they jump to their feet and start scattering would be comical if Chuuya weren't so annoyed right now, especially as he watches Dazai cling to Oda like a stubborn monkey before his bodyguard eventually manages to slip out with an apologetic grin. Chuuya waits silently, staring Dazai down until even the surprised murmur of Yosano's voice recedes in the background and the door finally falls shut.

Drawing up his knees, Dazai seriously has the gall to pretend Chuuya isn't there in the room.

"Now would be the time to start speaking," Chuuya mutters as he walks over to the couch and sits down, leaving Dazai some space in case he needs it.

"*Me?"* Dazai looks at him like he's a walking circus dog. "You're the one who sent everyone away. *I* have nothing to say. There's not a single thought in my head. At all. Nada."

When all Chuuya does is raise his brows, not needing glasses to see through Dazai's defense mechanism, his shoulders droop somewhat, throat working as he swallows down whatever stupid joke or insult was about to come out of his mouth next.

Chuuya expects something, but he doesn't anticipate the low pitch in his tone when he speaks.

"You didn't come home yesterday."

"I… work got messy."

"I can see that." Dazai lifts his hand to Chuuya's bruised cheek, yet all he does is let it ghost there before eventually dropping it into his lap. Chuuya's heart falls too. "It wasn't only work, though."

"No, it wasn't."

The moment between them stretches and expands.

Dazai listlessly flicks his fingers towards him. "I waited for you."

"I thought you were having dinner with Oda and Yosano." Chuuya's head tilts as he fails to see how *he's* being framed as the one who didn't want an evening alone with Dazai. "That's what you told me yesterday morning."

“Well, I changed my mind!”

Chuuya snorts. “Really, Dazai? And I’m what — supposed to read your mind all across the city?”

“*No*.” Chin pillowed on his knee, Dazai’s gaze keeps sliding towards him even if he seems to be adamant about looking the other way — everywhere but at Chuuya. “I might have come to the realization that I misinterpreted what you asked me.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yosano was very vocal about how stupid I am for such a smart person.”

“And why’s that?”

“You were asking me for a…” His words stutter a little. Dazai lets out a little puff of breath and jerks his chin towards Chuuya. “... a date or something, which doesn’t make any sense because you were talking about doing things we do all the time together anyway. How was I supposed to know that Chuuya meant something different? You never called it a *you know what*.”

Dazai’s befuddlement to say the word *date* makes Chuuya bite his cheek to stop himself from grinning like a besotted idiot.

Fuck.

“I didn’t call it a date because I wasn’t sure whether you even wanted something like that,” Chuuya replies. “With me.”

The look Dazai gives him is downright *violent*. “So you thought I was throwing myself at you like a cat in heat for the fun of it?”

“Actually, *yes*. I thought this was a joke to you.”

“Well, it wasn’t. I prepared us dinner,” Dazai blurts out. “And by dinner, I mean I bought us prepackaged ramen. I decorated it all fancy, though. With spices and all. And *you* didn’t show up!”

“How was I supposed to know?! You weren’t even nice about rejecting my question!”

“Because you weren’t specific about it being a date thing!”

“I’m sorry, okay!”

“You should be! Now you’re —” Dazai waves his hand over him with a dramatic glare of disgust. “— contaminated!”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I always use protection.”

“That doesn’t matter because I *know* that you’ve been whoring around while I was at home and waiting for you!”

“I needed a release!”

“Well, next time —”

“Next time what?”

“Next time, use *me!”*

“God fucking damn it, you dumpster fire.” Chuuya’s words are a breathless rasp because he’s already lurching forward and Dazai is swallowing loudly, his skin pulsing under Chuuya’s fingers and then their lips are crashing together like waves in a storm, and every thought, every muttered insult, and every word dies on his tongue.

Much like the first time Chuuya ever hugged him, Dazai stiffens, his mouth soft and warm and unmoving against him for a few agonizingly long seconds before his body must regain its function, and he presses back against him. Tentative, at first, not quite sure what to do with himself or that body of his. Then with fervent urgency, his hands knotting in Chuuya’s shirt as if he’s finally been allowed a bite after years of starvation.

It’s all clumsy, uncontrolled hunger and the thundering rush of blood in their ears, and heavy breaths until Chuuya slides his hands up to cup Dazai’s face and slow it down, feeling a little like he’s sixteen and full of hormones except that he doesn’t recall ever feeling like this – like every nerve inside him is lit on fire and there’s a magnetic force propelling him forward and towards Dazai.

Chuuya has to break away when something dandelion-light and warm flutters through his lungs and out of his mouth — a laugh — one that he smothers against the corner of Dazai’s lips because this is so unreal.

Dazai feels unreal.

“Just for the record,” Chuuya murmurs, chest rising and falling heavily, as he brushes Dazai’s bangs out of his face, “you’re still an idiot.”

Dazai juts out his chin. “Am I really an idiot if I got everything I wanted?”

Maybe he’s right and Chuuya’s the idiot. Maybe this all played out exactly like Dazai wanted. With a bang instead of communication and feelings – something he vocally despises. And maybe this isn’t the healthiest beginning of whatever this thing between them is, but Chuuya would be the best liar in the world if he said that it intrigues him as much as it frustrates him, like a moth drawn to flame.

So what he says instead is, “*everything you wanted*, huh?”

“Chuuuya,” Dazai complains.

Fighting his smile, he leans closer. “Yes?”

“Just kiss me again and don’t make me talk about it!”

Chuuya wants to play a little more, already feels his stomach curl in delighted anticipation at the thought of actual teasing, considering Dazai’s already this much of an impatient brat after a few kisses. For now, he lets that desire simmer in silence, though. The present is not so bad either, after all. Not bad at all.

Lifting himself on his knees, Chuuya slots their mouths back together once again, with a bit of a height advantage this time that he uses to control the pace and intensity of the kiss. Whatever experience Dazai has must be modest, but what he lacks in that department, he makes up for with eagerness as he returns every kiss with trembling fire in his veins.

Chuuya’s never kissed someone like that before. People who were skilled? Definitely, but not — not this hungry for it. Dying to touch and get touched in return.

And he didn’t expect it from Dazai either. Someone whose world is painted in lifeless grey colors and someone who masks it with over-the-top self-destructive behavior.

But Dazai kisses him like he has finally discovered what it means to live.

And Chuuya intends to show him every color of the fucking spectrum.

Slowly Chuuya lets his hands wander down the length of Dazai’s chest before pushing him down. They’re pretty much in the same position as

a few days ago. Dazai lying on his back and staring up at Chuuya with wide, dark eyes, and Chuuya above him, every nerve inside his system set alight. Except Chuuya's not pinning him anymore but letting his hands slowly travel over the gauze wrapped around Dazai's arms.

"This okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Because, of course, Dazai's going to get defensive even in the position he's in.

"Because I like to communicate with my partners," Chuuya quips with a shrug. "You know, adult things."

Dazai's fingers twist idly in his shirt before trying to tug him down. "I'd be more okay if you just got on with it."

"Make out for five minutes, fuck you, and that's it? Is that what you think this is going to be?"

"You don't seem to have problems doing that with anyone else."

"But… you're not…"

"I'm not what?"

"You're not just *anyone."*

Dazai's head tilts. "I'm not?"

"You have to ask that?" Chuuya wants to punch his chest, settles on poking his forehead instead. "Do you think I'd let you live with me if you were just anyone?"

"I'm here because you said my dorm was not safe enough for the time being with all the… conflicts you have going on at work."

Chuuya scoffs. "And yet here I am kissing you. Is that because of work, too?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"It's not."

The worst thing out of the entire thing is that Dazai still kissed him back, still put so much of himself into it even when he wasn't sure whether he was being used or not.

“It’s not,” Chuuya repeats. “You’re here because I want you to be here. It’s that simple.”

Dazai fists tighten in his shirt. “Then Chuuya should do something about it before all his roommates come back and he starts yelling again.”

“Well, can you blame me?” Chuuya can’t fight the amused smile begging to stretch on his lips. “You were being pretty damn rude clinging to Oda like that right in front of my eyes.”

“So it worked? You were jealous?” The way he says it makes it sounds like Dazai doesn’t quite believe it himself, which is absurd.

“Of course, I was fucking jealous,” Chuuya says, rolling his eyes. “Even if I knew you were just an annoying brat.”

Dazai doesn’t respond. All he does is clink his stupid gorgeous eyelashes and clutch Chuuya’s shirt like he’ll fly into the orbit if he doesn’t hold on tight enough.

Fine.

Exhaling softly, Chuuya lifts his hand to stroke his thumb over Dazai’s chin before gripping it. Not very hard, just enough to keep him in place. Dazai’s breath gets more shallow with each second, and god, Chuuya loves it, is drunk on how sensitive he is, how he responds to each touch and word and caress like to a lightning bolt.

When he finally leans down and kisses Dazai again, he feels even himself shudder at the slick, electrifying sensation that rushes through his blood, down to his stomach where it pools into something hot and heavy.

At the first slide of tongue, Dazai releases a whimpering noise in the back of his throat, and Chuuya *snaps*.

“You’re so…” Words epically fail him. Instead, he spreads his fingers to cup Dazai’s face as his lips travel lower, down to the gentle slope of his chin and the sharp line of his jaw. When Chuuya kisses the spot where his pulse throbs, Dazai jerks, a squealing giggle bursting out of him.

“Tickles,” Dazai breathes out with shoulders that try to hide the place that Chuuya wants most right now.

Chuuya grins. „Does it now? Would be a shame if someone were to abuse it —"

„*Chuuya*!“ Dazai screeches, fingers desperately grappling at his hair when he lowers his mouth to his neck again, pressing feather-light kisses against his pale skin. His indignant complaint melts into a moan as Chuuya lets teeth graze sensitive skin.

It‘s so easy to work Dazai up with mere touches, make his head fall back with precise pressure, and make his hips jerk by dipping one hand under his t-shirt, finding a patch of bare skin, and simply massaging it. So easy to lose himself in the process as well.

And so it’s that much more annoying when Chuuya’s phone interrupts the wonderful noises that Dazai’s making, ruining everything. Chuuya groans into the crook of Dazai’s neck, and Dazai chuckles quietly before Chuuya picks up.

“Yes?”

“Lad.” And that’s Kouyou. “There’s a meeting between all five executives today. Ten o’clock.”

“What? You sure?”

“Yes. Come see me before. There’s something important I need to talk to you about.”

“Yeah, okay,” Chuuya mutters, too annoyed to even school his voice in front of Kouyou. “I’ll be there soon.”

Sliding two hands around Chuuya’s torso, Dazai pouts. “Let me guess. You have to go?”

“I wish you were wrong,” Chuuya murmurs with a sigh. “Raincheck on —” He pauses, wondering whatever the hell this is. Dating? Feelings? A relationship? Who the hell knows. “— this?”

“Not like there is another option,” Dazai grumbles.

“I still have time for breakfast, though. Speaking of which… we should probably text Yosano and Oda.”

“*You* should, considering *you* kicked them out.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t play a part in that.”

Whatever Dazai was about to reply gets lost in the breathless, whole-hearted laughter when Chuuya attacks him.

Dazai's at the table and reading a book, Chuuya picking up the breakfast that Yosano had to abandon – a silent apology for kicking them out — when Oda and Yosano come back, even if it's without the guerilla attack force members and the weretiger.

Oda, at least, pretends to mind his business as he raids the fridge for yogurts. Yosano, on the other hand, plants herself in the doorway with hands on her hips and looks between the two of them as if waiting for the words WE JUST MADE OUT LIKE HORNY TEENAGERS to appear out of thin air.

"You two look content. Suspiciously content."

"Yeah, well," Chuuya continues stirring the food in the pan idly, "that's what happens when two people talk it out like adults."

Dazai flips the page of his book. "And I am always content. I have never been anything but content in my entire life."

Yosano scoffs. "Did you — did you two actually do it?"

"I have no idea what you mean," Chuuya says innocently.

"Did you guys fuck?"

They did not.

"I don't know, Chuuya." Dazai turns to stare at him with theatrically wide eyes. "Did we?"

Chuuya continues the charade with a shrug. "I'm so *tired* that my memories are a little fuzzy. I really don't know."

Oda shakes his head in silent disappointment as he opens his second yogurt. "You two agreeing on something for the first time, and it's on this of all things?"

"The vibes are *off*," Yosano mutters, sitting down next to Oda and wordlessly demanding a taste herself. Like the gentleman he is, Oda offers her the spoon, but she only opens her mouth and waits expectantly to be fed. Chuuya hopes that whenever *that* happens, they'll be able to fuck it out somewhere else because he has heard stories of Yosano's adventures in bed, and he cannot possibly do that

much laundry.

After turning off the stove, Chuuya turns to the pack. “Who’s hungry?”

They all make some noise, and when he so happens to let his hand linger on Dazai’s back for longer than necessary while he loads his plate with food, no one comments on it.

It’s weird.

This tiny makeshift family of four entirely different personalities that probably never would have met if the world was a kinder place.

But Chuuya? He finds that he likes it. He really, really likes it.

Kouyou’s waiting for him in her office, a cup of tea in her hand.

“You look happy,” she points out first things first. Considering she’s running a brothel and knows all the ins and outs about the human body, Chuuya’s not surprised she notices the happy flush on his cheek.

“What can I say?” he drawls, marching over to the window to look over the city, beginning to wake up. “I love a good fight.” Shoving his hands into the pocket of his coat, he glances over his shoulder. “What do you need to talk about?”

Kouyou pats the seat next to her. The only reason he does sit down is because he doesn’t want her to beat around the bush.

“I have reason to believe that the boss is looking into you,” she pauses for a moment before saying, “*friend.*”

Chuuya fights the instinct to think of the worst-case scenario. “Did Akutagawa say something?”

Kouyou halts with her teacup in front of her mouth. “What would he possibly have to say about it?”

“He might have met Dazai… once or twice,” Chuuya admits with a cringe. “Nothing serious. Just some innocent midnight encounters.” At least, the first time. Chuuya has no idea what they spent talking about while he was napping at Tachihara’s. Akutagawa’s not completely stupid, though. Not much of a talker either.

“Well, not that I know of. I had lunch with the boss yesterday, and he asked me about him. That’s why I’m telling you this.”

Chuuya exhales. “Well, he can look as much as he wants. Dazai’s just a college student, and I’m pretty sure my day-to-day work here proves that I’m dedicated to the port mafia no matter what I do at home.”

As long as it remains only *looking.* If Mori were ever to meet Dazai, he’d be able to see his potential. Not only in his ability but his brain.

And if that ever happens… Chuuya’s not sure what he would do. Probably something incredibly stupid.

Kouyou nods curtly. “I wanted to give you a heads up in case you…” She trails off quietly.

“In case I what?” Chuuya scoffs. “In case I decide to run?” he asks, quieter this time. It’s a touchy subject, even touchier words, and even though Chuuya has established himself as a loyal, good-working executive over the last six years, he’s not careless enough to throw around the words. “Ane-san, you know I’m not that stupid.”

“I never know. Love makes you do unexpected things.”

Love.

Pulling back his shoulder, Chuuya huffs out an agitated breath. He wants to deny it. Yes, he has feelings for that stupid mackerel. Lots of them. But is it enough to call it something so grand? *Love* is a powerful word. One that he has eliminated from his life after one person too many died because of him. And yet, when he opens his mouth to correct her, nothing comes out except air.

“So I was right,” Kouyou concludes quietly.

“I’m keeping a clear head,” Chuuya says. “I won’t throw away my whole life and this career just because I’m — I’m *fond* of some guy.”

“I hope that for you, Chuuya-kun. I really do.”

Chuuya busies himself by diving face-first into work until the meeting, preparing counteroffensive plans, dividing his subordinates into teams, and making sure both their communication systems and weapons are up to date. Nonetheless, he finds his thoughts drifting off to a certain someone way more often than he cares to admit. It makes his stomach curl around itself every time with *all these damn feelings.* At some point, one of his subordinates, Handa, even asks him whether he’s feeling all right since he’s been acting so strange. Needless to say, Chuuya tells him to mind his own damn business.

The meeting, unlike anyone else, gets straight down to business. No talks about background checks or love or weird behavior. It's about the direction the mafia's supposed to take. Even though the guild's here and causing trouble, the money can't stop flowing. People say that money is the blood that runs through the mafia's veins for a reason. It is about money. Money and power.

Afterwards, Chuuya considers staying to have a private chat with Mori, but the idea doesn't seem right to him; it feels like sucking up and finding excuses for something he shouldn't need excuses for.

There is no written record of Dazai's ability anywhere. Chuuya knows that because he browsed through his birth certificates and background reports himself. Four times, by now. And aside from a few school reports with impeccable grades but piss-poor participation and attendance skills, there is nothing that suggests he's smart enough to be wanted by Mori.

So it's fine.

Mori can look all he wants. The only thing he'll find is a college student with a pretty face.

Besides, Chuuya doesn't want to spend more time at work than he has to anyway. Someone is waiting for him at home, and he's dying to get back there.

Coming home shouldn't feel different.

It isn't.

Their life around them won't slow down just to give them enough time to talk about everything, about what they want from each other, and about definitions, or whatever it is that adult people do in their relationships — frankly, Chuuya's as clueless about that aspect as Dazai. So, for now, it's casually serious. Light touches. Back rubs. Dazai gave him a goodbye kiss in their room before Chuuya left for work, so it really should be just like every other day.

Until Chuuya lets the door fall shut behind him, glances up to see Dazai coming around the corner, wearing an oversized pastel-pink sweater, matching overknees, and bunny-slippers, and he feels like a Christmas tree flickers to life inside him.

"Hi," Dazai greets him, folding his hands together in front of himself

but not moving to do anything either.

Chuuya's stomach tumbles as he starts slipping out of his coat with a smile. "Hey." Jesus, this feels like he's fourteen and going through the epic stages of his first crush all over again. It's terrible. He loves it. "Where are Yosano and Oda?"

"In the living room. Watching a movie."

"Oh?" Finally out of his shoes, Chuuya slowly walks over to Dazai, waggling his brows. "Movie, huh?"

"Mhm," Dazai hums thickly when Chuuya comes to a stop in front of him. "*Hi again*."

"Hi yourself." Chuuya's torn between grinning goofily and the near-painful urge to touch Dazai, kiss him, and not stop until they're both breathless and stupid. He chooses the latter. Bringing up one hand to cup Dazai's cheek, he kisses him, nice and slow, before pulling away.

Dazai swallows loudly, then opens his eyes. "There's, uh, warm dinner on the stove."

"I'm not hungry right now." Chuuya wraps his fingers around Dazai's wrist and starts leading them into the bedroom. "Not for food anyway."

"Heh, is that Chuuya's way of saying — " Dazai's sentence comes to a breathless end when the door gets shut, and Chuuya maneuvers him on the bed, maybe with somewhat more enthusiasm than either of them expected. "Ouchy*?"*

"Sorry," Chuuya murmurs, not feeling sorry at all as he climbs on the bed and settles himself atop of Dazai. It's a position he starts to like more and more with each minute. "I couldn't help myself." Somehow their fingers find their way towards each other before they interlace, and Chuuya gently presses them against the mattress as he leans down to kiss Dazai again. "You're just so…"

He's not sure what the end of that sentence is either. All he knows is that Dazai's skin is pulsing with heat under his touch, lips addicting as they accept each kiss that Chuuya gives him and wordlessly demand more, and Chuuya wants to fucking drown in the pool of mars-brown eyes that blink up at him when they come up for a breath.

If this is what dating and relationships are all about, Chuuya is a fool

for denying himself of this for so long. He feels sickeningly alive. More alive than he did in years. More alive than when he's jumping from the roof of a building or fighting for his life.

And he never wants to stop.

Despite the initial desperation, they do slow down after a few minutes. As much as Chuuya would like to spend the rest of this night in bed, and Dazai too, from what he's gathered, he still wants to, at least, say hello to their roommates at some point. And take a shower to wash off all the dirt from work. And maybe eat even though he doubts he could fit anything inside with all the terrible, amazing emotions seeping out of him like ink. Their bruising kisses turn into slow, lazy ones, simply lying there and making out, exploring each and every dip of each other's mouths and bodies until Chuuya's lips are buzzing.

"I think," he says after a while, propping himself up with one hand to be able to look at Dazai, "your sloth-energy is infectious."

"Moi?" Dazai blinks at him with hooded eyes. "I —" He yawns. "— nouaslof."

Chuuya sneaks one hand over to poke his cheek. "No idea what you just said, but I'm sure it was a shameless lie."

Dazai bites his fingers in reply.

"Hey!"

Dazai offers him an innocent look. "What? You seemed to like biting just fine a few moments ago."

"Yeah, and Imma show you just how much —" Chuuya pulls Dazai close, accidentally rolling them over in the process, and this time, it's Dazai who ends up on top.

Chuuya can't say that he minds that sight either. Dazai is…

"Pretty." Dazai's lashes flutter, and Chuuya realizes he must have said that out loud. "You're pretty," he repeats more clearly this time. His right hand slowly rubs up and down the length of Dazai's thigh, loves how much a simple touch like this manages to faze Dazai and get him all flustered.

"You're… not that bad of a sight yourself."

Chuuya snorts. “Thanks.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t even be here, allowing you to slobber all over me if you weren’t easy on the eyes. I’ll have you know my taste in people is immaculate.”

“That so?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Then —” A horrifying growl from Chuuya’s stomach interrupts him and makes his head drop back with a little sigh. It seems like his body doesn’t care whether it’s already pumped full of endorphins. “We should probably leave this room at some point.”

Playing with his fingers, Dazai agrees, albeit it doesn’t look that convincing. “We should.”

“C’mon.”

It takes a village to force his legs to move off the bed when all they want to do is stay here with Dazai, preferably entangled, but at last, they both half-stumble to their feet.

The fact that only yesterday Chuuya had never even kissed Dazai before but was *kissing someone else* actually seems utterly wrong and also like it happened a lifetime ago. He has no idea how he managed to live for so long without this — tugging at Dazai’s wrist as they walk to the kitchen, leaving all but no space between them — but Chuuya knows that he’ll never be able to feel like before again.

Chuuya heats the chicken hotpot they had for dinner, and Dazai steals himself a peach from the fruit basket on the counter that gets forgotten way too often. There has been a suspicious lack of sounds from the living room aside from the occasional explosions and screaming from the TV. Either Yosano fell asleep — since she is the one doing 95% of the talking — or there is something else going on there.

So Chuuya and Dazai decide to investigate.

It’s neither this nor that.

Yosano’s head is resting on Oda’s shoulder, although they both glance up at their arrival.

“Having fun?” Chuuya can’t help but tease. (After everything he had to listen to, he deserves getting to do this.)

Yosano lifts one perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Are you?”

“Time of our lives.”

Chuuya doesn’t expect Dazai to casually slide one arm around him and pull him back into his chest. However, he finds that he likes this surprise very much. Chuuya instantly melts back into him and has to stifle a laugh when Dazai takes a juicy bite of his damn peach.

The weird stare-off only lasts for so long before Yosano fondly shakes her head and reclaims her place on Oda’s shoulder.

They should probably do a movie night again soon, but not tonight. Tonight is reserved for Dazai and Dazai only.

“Hey,” they hear Oda call as they turn around, “congratulations. It took long enough.”

“Shut up,” Chuuya murmurs.

Dazai hides his smile in Chuuya’s hair.

Chapter End Notes

.... aren't they just so *clenches fists* sweet

+ thank you so so much for all your sweet comments!!! i am crying soft tears with each chapter and i'm so thankful for all the support!
+ just a lil pretaste: next chapter picks up where this one leaves off bc their first night together isn't finished yet
+ i'm gonna update the spotify playlist soon so feel free to check it out for the latest inspo songs

Chapter 10: Secrets

Chapter Notes

> There are mentions of both past sexual trauma and sexual abuse in this chapter (towards the beginning and the middle mostly)! and (safe) explicit sexual content. Please take care <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even something as simple as eating dinner leftovers, doing his night routine, and brushing his teeth becomes an exciting adventure to look forward to when you have someone to share it with. By the time they're finally back in their bedroom, Chuuya's cheeks hurt from grinning so much. Slowly but surely, the buzzing in his heart is starting to melt into something… hotter.

By the looks of it, Dazai's is too.

That much is obvious from the coy look on his face as he sits on the bed in an oversized grey shirt, legs tucked under himself and spread, watching Chuuya fuss with tomorrow's clothes. His gaze is quite penetrant, too, so that Chuuya feels the need to glance over his shoulder at some point, raising his brows.

"Waiting for something?"

Dazai's hands fist in the sheets, but his expression remains carefully collected. "Are you always this slow? Maybe you should call yourself slug instead of Chuuya. That'd be way more fitting."

"Good things come to those who wait," Chuuya says, walking over to the windows to draw the curtains shut. The room isn't completely dark. The lamp on his nightstand remains. Soft and warm and perfect. "Don't you agree, Dazai?"

Apparently, he doesn't.

Dazai snaps forward with a whine, long arms wrapping around Chuuya's torso and kidnapping him. "Chuuuuuya. Stop being so mean to me!" Barely able to contain his laughter, Chuuya drives his fingers through Dazai's hair before properly climbing on the bed. "We were interrupted before, but now you have no more excuses. You have to fuck me!"

“Jesus,” Chuuya mutters, heart thundering in his ears. “If I’d know you were so greedy, I would have stuffed your pretty little mouth ages ago.”

Dazai’s eyes grow wide. Not with shock, but with desire, loud and rampant, as Chuuya pushes him down on the bed with a hand on his chest and steals whatever smart-ass reply was going to come out of his mouth with a kiss.

Chuuya doesn’t intend to fuck Dazai right here and now. Their time is limited. His walls are thick but not thick enough for everything that he wants to do with Dazai. And —

Chuuya wants to make it good the first time he fucks Dazai, wants to take his time working him open and then fucking him mindless.

But *god*, the temptation is so *big*.

And Dazai is tugging at his shirt, unconsciously rocking his hips up like he doesn’t even know what he wants himself.

“Fuck,” Chuuya breathes out against the corner of his mouth, hand reaching down, “you’re going to be the end of me.”

“You must be pretty, *ah —”* Dazai’s mouth parts around a soft moan as Chuuya slides his hand under his sweater to touch skin. “— weak then.”

“Or you’re…” Chuuya trails off, swallowing loudly as he takes in the lacy red lingerie Dazai is wearing.

Fuck.

FUCK.

“Did you plan this?”

Dazai shakes his head.

“You wear lingerie every day then, hm?” Feeling himself losing his mind a little, Chuuya slides his index finger under paper-thin waistband, feeling a low shudder run through Dazai’s thigh. Then he lets the soft fabric snap against his skin. “Do you?”

“It was a lucky guess?” Dazai says innocently before pressing his mouth together and letting out a sigh. “It might have been a calculated move tonight, but to be fair, I did wear cute undies the

entire week, hoping that one of these days you'd…" He cuts himself off and shrugs. Apparently, Chuuya's supposed to finish that sentence himself but nope. He won't have that.

"Nuh-uh." Chuuya lets his fingers ghost over Dazai's cock trapped under the fabric. "Hoping that I'd *what*?"

Dazai turns his head, mumbling softly. "You know…"

"I don't."

Another loud, petulant sigh. "That you'd finally, *I don't know*, rip off my clothes, see them, and fuck me. Had I known that you would interrogate me first, I'd have chosen another route."

Wow.

"How long exactly have you been wanting this to happen, Dazai?"

Dazai stubbornly juts out his chin. "How long have *you*?"

"I already told you. If you had simply asked, I'd have fucked you the first time — okay, maybe not the first two times, but the third time we met." *Dazai sitting outside, reading a book in that skirt*. Yeah, that image is basically *imprinted* in Chuuya's memory.

"But you didn't," Dazai points out and subtly tries to buck his hips into Chuuya's hand. "It took you *ages."*

"Because I didn't know you wanted me to." But that's not all, is it? "And because I didn't want to drag you deeper into my life than I already had."

"*Chuuya,"* Dazai groans, and —

"Right, right." Usually, Chuuya's not that fucking talkative in bed. He likes a good build-up like every other person, but he prefers teasing his partners with his mouth, fingers, or toys, *not* endless conversations. This whole situation and Dazai aren't anything he ever experienced, though.

He wants to get it *right*. He wants to know what went through Dazai's head all these months they spent together. He wants every inch that Dazai is willing to give him.

And here is Dazai, offering him a whole lot more than just inches. (No pun intended.)

“I’m not going to fuck you,” Chuuya breathes against his neck and finally, finally lets his fingers dip under the lingerie, meeting hot, pulsing skin. “But I’m going to get you off. Don’t worry.”

Dazai has to physically shove him away to be able to talk — which Chuuya finds adorable. “Wh— why not?” His cheeks puff in visible frustration. “I *want* it. I want *you*.”

“Spoken like a true brat,” Chuuya drawls, smiling when he gives Dazai’s cock one agonizingly slow stroke that make his whole body go taut with sensation. “Trust me, there’s nothing I’d like more than to fuck you into the mattress, but…”

“Don’t tell me you want to make it, ah… “ Dazai’s lips part so beautifully around an audible breath. “…special…”

Chuuya’s cheeks flush with heat. He rolls his eyes.

“I want to make it perfect,” he says instead, “and considering how even kissing your neck drives you half-mad, I’d like to take my time.” He tilts his head. “Unless you think otherwise?”

Dazai’s silence is loud and clear.

“Good.” Chuuya places a kiss against Dazai’s pulse point. “Then let me…” His hands skim the scarred skin under Dazai’s sweater again, feather-light strokes that elicit goosebumps in their wake. “Can I take it off?”

Dazai lifts his arms in reply. Chuuya takes it as his cue to go ahead, tugging it off before tossing it carelessly aside. The sight under him is far more important. Miles of skin, ghostly pale from never seeing the sunlight, and probably all the more sensitive from being covered in bandages most of the time.

He feels Dazai squirm and snort out a huff. “You might as well take a picture if all you’re going to do is stare.”

“I’m appreciating,” Chuuya murmurs only inches away from his mouth before kissing him and placing a hand on his chest, stroking softly before rubbing his thumb over one nipple. Dazai exhales through his nose, and Chuuya helps out with his index finger, using it to roll the hardening bud and pinch it slightly.

He likes getting his chest played with himself, but what *he* feels and the reaction he gets out of *Dazai* are worlds apart, and he *loves* it.

Taking his sweet time, Chuuya slowly lets his other hand travel lower again, rubbing over the panties and the wet spot that has formed there. God, Dazai really is so sensitive. It's amazing. When he finally decides to play nice and take off the panties, he makes sure to feel Dazai's reaction right against his lips, drinking up the breathless moan that slips out of him when he is finally bare against Chuuya.

Dazai's lids drift open to glare at him. "And you call *me* greedy," he huffs, making Chuuya tilt his head curiously. "You're basically *a nun* compared to me, still completely dressed and all."

Chuuya hums and decides to slip out of the yukata. "Want to take care of the rest?" he asks, giving Dazai the choice.

If Dazai was greedy before, he's a barbarian *now,* attacking Chuuya's underwear without much grace or patience, eliciting an amused laugh in Chuuya as he raises himself on his knees to help him with the process of wrestling off the last piece of clothing.

The exposure to the brisk air in the room makes Chuuya's skin prickle with excitement, but the actual cause for the way his stomach flip-flops is the look in Dazai's eyes when he gets a look at his cock.

"You're…" Dazai says and folds his hands together like a prim princess. "... adequately built."

Chuuya snorts. "You can say my cock is big. It's all right, sweetheart."

"And you're pierced." Dazai winces as he says that. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"Only the good kind of pain," Chuuya replies. He'd laugh at the reaction. Not when Dazai's attention is already solely focused on devouring Chuuya with smoldering, hungry eyes, though. Dazai tentatively lifts his hand and places it on his chest, then his abs, and lower, lower, lower —

Chuuya closes the distance between them, slotting his mouth against Dazai's as long, warm fingers wrap around his cock. If Chuuya wasn't fully hard before, he definitely is now with the way Dazai's hand is stroking him: timid, sure, a little, but more than that: so criminally curious and enthusiastic that Chuuya ends up hissing softly.

Repositioning himself over Dazai's thighs, he thrusts forward, letting both their cocks slide together. It elicits the most delicious whine in the back of Dazai's throat. One that Chuuya drinks up like actual wine

except this one's much sweeter.

He keeps them like that, more or less rutting against each other while Chuuya devotes his entire soul to undoing Dazai with his mouth. The rush of satisfaction that pumps through his blood every time he nips at Dazai's lip or pinches his sore, puffy nipple or slips his tongue into his mouth is addictive. Better than any drug he has ever tasted — and he has tried out *a lot* of them in his life. Dazai's just so sensitive, and Chuuya can't help but exploit that, let his hands travel down the length of his cock and massage his balls between his fingers and —

Dazai suddenly throws his head back with an overwhelmed whimper and comes.

Breathing hard, Chuuya watches for a puzzled moment as thick ribbons of come land on his chest and stomach before leaning down and kissing Dazai again because *fuck* —

This is so —

Dazai lets himself be kissed until his muscles relax and his chest stops heaving like he's just run a marathon, releasing a muffled whine against Chuuya's lips in what must be overstimulation.

"Fuck," Chuuya breathes out after pulling back, his hips and hand stilling, "you're so fucking hot."

Dazai leans away with big wide doe eyes, torn between staring at him and squirming away from the attention. "Really?"

"Really." Chuuya settles his hand on his stomach, starting a leisure pace of rubbing circles into his skin.

Dazai sniffs against his mouth, kissing him once before making a sheepish face. "Hey, Chuuya?" Chuuya lifts his head, raising his brows. "Remember when I told you I wasn't a virgin? Well. I might have… lied about that..."

Chuuya blinks at him for a second. It's not that surprising and Chuuya would be lying if he said, he hadn't thought about it before but somehow he was stupid enough to believe Dazai was telling him the truth, that he was simply sensitive and not just very new to all of this. "Thanks for telling me so early on," he mutters, letting out a sigh.

He feels Dazai stroke a hand through his hair. "Is it a problem?"

“No. No, I don’t care.” Chuuya looks up at him again and lifts his hand to cup his cheek. “I just think it’s… good to know for the future.” Not that Chuuya was planning to fuck him roughly and quickly anyway – even if he wants to — but now that he knows, he’ll make sure to be patient and more careful. “Why’d you lie?” And when Chuuya sees Dazai’s face redden, he says, “Don’t tell me it’s embarrassing.”

“It is,” Dazai says. “A little.”

“There are really worse things to worry about than whether you ever had sex or not.”

“I thought I could evade the truth,” Dazai admits, letting one hand sneak down the plane of Chuuya’s abs, “because, y’know, I’m not an *animal*. I’ve watched porn. Read it. I lived with a dick for the last twenty-one years. You know, all that.”

Chuuya cracks a smile.

“But doing this is different than imagining or watching it.”

“Worse different? Or better different?”

“Just different.” He shrugs. “It definitely felt better coming with you than alone, though.”

“Yeah, well, just wait until you have your first prostate orgasm. Unless,” Chuuya squints, “you’ve tried out yourself before?”

Dazai scrunches his nose. “Not really.” Chuuya doesn’t need to ask for elaborations on that — he’s been there himself, trying to stick fingers up his ass and feeling frustratedly let down by the lack of magical orgasm the first time. He was not only stubborn, though, but also spent most of his teenage years around Kouyou’s girls. It didn’t take him long to discover the wonders of ass play.

“If you want to, of course,” Chuuya adds.

“Is it really that different?”

Chuuya feels his smirk grow. “Oh, yes.”

“So you do both?” Dazai continues, probably trying to distract him as his hands creep closer and closer to Chuuya’s cock, still hard and waiting for attention. “Topping and bottoming?”

Chuuya’s eyes fall closed when Dazai finally gets his hands on him,

mouth parting with the delightful pressure that his fist provides. “Uh, it depends. Sometimes I’m in a certain mood, you know?” With how diligently Dazai is rolling his thumb over the four frenulum piercings, Chuuya wouldn’t be surprised to find out that he’s not even listening to him. “Sometimes, it depends on my partner.”

Dazai’s adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “What mood are you in when you’re with me?”

“I’m dying… “ Chuuya’s hand tightens around his thigh when Dazai flicks his wrist at an up-stroke. “… to fuck your pretty little brain out of your head.”

“So…” Dazai’s fingers start squeezing him and Chuuya half-laughs, half-hisses, telling him to take it down a notch with a touch. “... why don’t you do it right now?”

“Because,” Chuuya says in the same tone, “I have other plans for you.”

In a moment of utter childishness, Dazai kicks out his feet, thankfully leaving his dick alone this time. “What about what *I* want?”

“Patience, Dazai.”

“*You* be patient!”

“I am patient.”

“No, you’re just annoying.” Dazai looks like he wants to add another insult, but he decides otherwise when Chuuya leans over him and opts to kiss him instead. *Smart boy.*

“C’mon,” Chuuya whispers, breath ghosting over Dazai’s lips, “don’t you want to make me come like this first?”

Under him, Dazai swallows in time with a tiny stutter in his rhythm. “I guess. Isn’t this boring for someone like you, though?”

“Someone like me?”

“You know. Someone who whores around regularly.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes and uses that moment to leave them closed as he leans back on his heels and focuses on the pressure around his cock.

“It doesn’t feel boring with you.”

Usually, Dazai wouldn't be so far off with his conclusion — handjobs are generally on the very bottom of the sex hierarchy once he discovered how far he can actually push his body in terms of pleasure — but as always, Dazai's the exception to the rule. His long, beautiful fingers around his cock feel warm and tight in the best ways and every stroke, every twist around the head sends Chuuya tumbling towards the peak faster than his own fist ever did.

In the end, it's Dazai's gaze on him, hungry and electrified, as he watches Chuuya roll his hips up into the hot cage around his cock that lets his orgasm wash over him in a gentle, powdery wave of hot-white bliss, his back arching.

Dazai must watch every little twitch of muscle and every sigh because he doesn't stop jerking him off, not until Chuuya's satisfied expressions bleeds into a tiny frown. Even then, he catches a glint of something cruel in Dazai's eyes as he pushes the edge of overstimulation.

"Fuck," Chuuya grabs that evil hand and shoots Dazai a half-hearted scowl, "asshole."

Dazai's still watching him, quiet, and Chuuya feels a string of invisible words waiting to get off the tip of his tongue. "What is it, Dazai?"

"How are you so…"

"So what?"

"So shameless?"

Granted, Chuuya's first reaction is an offended *hah?!* but the genuine curiosity in Dazai's tone makes him stop and reconsider it.

"Because I'm not ashamed of it."

Dazai snorts.

"No, really," Chuuya says, climbing off the bed to get a towel from the bathroom. He's not done with him for tonight, but Dazai should be able to relax without his hands full of dried jizz. "Sex isn't something bad and I like it, so why should I be ashamed of it? And I know that you like me, so why would I be ashamed of showing you that I like it?"

"Well, now that you say it like that…"

Chuuya laughs as he cleans Dazai's hands. "It does sound stupid once you actually ask yourself, doesn't it?"

Dazai agrees with a hum.

"But it also takes time and practice."

"How does one practice being a shameless whore in bed?"

In Chuuya's case, it wasn't so much of a choice but an unexpected and positive side effect from his time before he got promoted to an executive. He had a pretty face, petite stature, and needed a way to prove himself. Fast. And there are only so many options to do that in the mafia. And even though he often had to slip into the role of shy, innocent boy most of the time, he simultaneously found that taking a genuine liking in it was the only way to hold onto *some* kind of power over his body.

"With me," Chuuya says reaching over to the drawer in his nightstand and grabbing his most-cherished brand of lube. Dazai follows the action with his eyes, then watches Chuuya press his fingertips against the skin of his thigh and slide higher with a teasingly slow pace.

"What are you doing?"

"Giving you the opportunity to practice."

"Again?"

Making himself comfortable between Dazai's thighs, Chuuya huffs out a smirk before draping his fingers over Dazai's shaft and giving him a long, broad lick across the length. "Sweetheart," he glances up to bat his eyelashes at Dazai, "you're already half-hard again."

Dazai's hands grab onto the sheet and he lets out a breathy laugh. "Crazy, huh…"

Crazy, indeed. Chuuya leans down and wraps his lips around the tip, using his tongue to dip into the slit with a gentle press before swirling it around the head. He likes doing that. Feeling a cock fill out in his mouth, feeling how the stretch in his jaw gets wider and wider, but most of all, he likes watching the effect he has on his partner from up close. It's maddening, addictive almost to feel Dazai harden with every swipe of his tongue.

The position also allows him to notice how taut Dazai's thighs become

around him, which he finds adorable at first and slightly concerning a few minutes later when they stay like that.

“Hey,” he murmurs, switching to open-mouthed kisses as his fingers massage the tense flesh bracketing him. “That feel good?”

“*Yup*!”

Chuuya bites his cheek, not daring to let laughter slip out of his mouth. “Can you do something for me then?”

“Do what?” Dazai sounds confused.

“Breathe.”

With the next swipe of his tongue against the vein on Dazai’s cock, Chuuya feels some of that tension seep out with a deep exhale — not all of it, of course, but good enough, for now, to allow Chuuya to focus on making him feel nice in the meanwhile.

“That’s good. Keep doing that.”

Chuuya decides it’s time for the lube. Grabbing it with one hand, clicking it open and squirting some onto his finger, he lets it warm up with body heat as he continues lapping at his cock. This has been a pretty low-maintenance blowjob so far, lazy licks and suckles to get Dazai relax as much as possible, but now Chuuya needs to amp up the build-up.

Keeping Dazai’s hips pinned against the bed with the hand that’s not slick with lube, Chuuya gets his cock back in his mouth, eyes falling shut as he bobs his head up and down on the length, getting him deeper and deeper with each raw noise that it elicits in Dazai. Every single one more beautiful than the other.

Slowly, he lets the lube-covered fingers stroke his shaft in time with his head’s movements before drifting lower, massaging his balls and stopping when Dazai jerks dangerously. He’s so sensitive there that Chuuya makes a mental note to devote an entire session to them one day. Then his hand travels lower, down to his perineum, and he pulls off Dazai’s cock with a wet gasp when he presses gently against it.

Dazai makes a whiny sound in the back of his throat, back arching of the bed. “W-why do I feel like you’re just pushing random buttons on my body?”

“Not random, at all,” Chuuya replies, his voice hoarse, and does it again to prove his point. “Do you think something random would make you feel this good?”

“Chuuya!” Dazai tosses his head back. “You’re making me feel all these things — but I can’t — and you —”

Wow, the most eloquent person in the entire world reduced to an incoherent string of words? This must be Chuuya’s birthday. *And* a reason to go on, finish what he started, which probably won’t take long as soon as Dazai feels his prostate stimulated from the inside.

Chuuya adds some more lube, rubs his fingertips together, and spreads Dazai’s gorgeous, long legs wider before grazing his rim and spreading the lube by teasing the puckered flesh around it. It makes Dazai twitch and shudder. Chuuya doesn’t intend to come anymore tonight, but the sight of Dazai taking his fingers for the first just might do the trick since this damn guy has the magical power of reverting him back into a hormone-driven teenager that can come at the drop of the hat.

“Tell me if anything ever hurts or doesn’t feel comfortable. Okay?”

“You keep teasing me. *That* hurts,” Dazai mutters half-heartedly.

“That’s just called a build-up,” Chuuya quips back and finally pushes one finger inside, just up to the first knuckle and very slowly to give Dazai the time to relax properly since some of that tension comes back with the intrusion in his body. “How’s that?” he asks, peppering his inner thigh with kisses.

“Feels… weird.”

“Bad weird?”

“Just weird. You know, like when I did it myself and then gave up after five minutes.”

Yeah, it does require some time and a clear destination.

Once Dazai’s walls aren’t clamping down around him anymore, Chuuya tries pulling the finger back, then pressing it inside again, wiggling it around and rubbing down the sensitive flesh around him. Dazai’s toes curl with every point of friction, but Chuuya can see that it’s still in the *pretty weird* territory, so he pays more attention to Dazai’s cock, rubs his tongue against his shaft and even lower, teasing his balls. A sigh leaves Dazai above him, then another, and Chuuya

uses the opportunity to push the finger a little further and —

"*Ah!"* Dazai's leg twitch like he's been shot, then go rigid all at once. "Oh my god, was that —"

"Your prostate? Probably." Chuuya nuzzles the tip of his cock, letting his breath wash over it. "I can do it again if you try to relax a little."

Dazai exhales loudly, spreading his thighs further but still keeping his feet around Chuuya's shoulders. Stimulating his prostate probably only has half the effect with just one finger, but Dazai's pretty sensitive to any and every movement anyway, so Chuuya pulls back a little and then finds the faint bump again, pressing his fingertip against it —

"Oh, *fuck,*" Dazai *gasps.*

He hasn't been exactly silent this entire time but *god*. Dazai using his words and being vocal sets off something primal in Chuuya.

He presses in a second finger with the next thrust, content when Dazai's muscles are relaxed enough to suck both of them in instead of tensing around them. Then Chuuya aims for his prostate and his prostate only, staying there and grinding against it. One of Dazai's hands finds his hair, tries gripping it, then fists in the sheet, and god, it's a sight, a *show* — like Dazai doesn't *know* what to do with all the pleasure rushing through him, so he just responds to all his physical instincts. His back arches off the bed like a bow one moment, the next his hips start stuttering and rocking back against Chuuya's finger, chanting an incomprehensible song of pleasure. It's beautiful, it's *genuine.* The mask Dazai's so careful to wear around people all the time peels off and reveals all those colors behind it.

It's hard and a little dangerous to keep sucking him off when Dazai's thrashing above him, so Chuuya fixates all his efforts on grinding his fingers against his prostate and stroking his cock until he must push him over the edge. Dazai goes entirely rigid, hands clutching Chuuya's head, keeping him there as he clumsily and mindlessly bucks his hips to meet Chuuya's thrusts and then comes with a broken sound.

Chuuya keeps his fingers there to ride it out until the very end, tongue darting out to lick some of the come that lands on his face. He only stops when Dazai clamps down around him, thighs trying to push together to squirm away from the oversensitivity that must be racking him.

But when Chuuya pulls out his fingers, a bereft whimper escapes Dazai, his whole body starting to shake a bit. “Hey,” Chuuya whispers, crawling up to drape himself over him, hands stroking up and down his sides in long, soothing motions. “You did so well. You were beautiful.”

Sniffing quietly, Dazai nuzzles his face into the crook of his neck. Chuuya wraps his arms around him and rolls over so Dazai can press closer against him, Chuuya’s swinging his leg over Dazai’s waist and keeping as much skin-to-skin contact as possible to keep him warm and safe and loved.

Chuuya has had some experiences with subdrops by now to know what to look out for – even if Dazai technically never went into subspace, as far as Chuuya is aware. It’s probably just *a lot* of sensation and pleasure shared with someone else after a lifetime of lack thereof.

Time passes. Chuuya feels their sweat and body fluids dry, which is a little gross, but at least the shivering has waned into an occasional quiver of muscles whenever he moves too much.

“I’d like to clean us up,” Chuuya murmurs and threads his fingers through Dazai’s messy hair. “That okay?”

Dazai’s fingers automatically cling tighter around him even as he mutters out a “whatever.”

Chuuya makes an effort to be quick and efficient this time. Normally, he’d suggest a bath but they both already showered, and he can feel the exhaustion from the last few days catch up to him. So he wipes both of them clean, opens the window to let the room air, smelling like sex and sweat, and gently bullies Dazai into drinking some water before he finally slips under the sheets.

“Chuuya was so quick to pounce on me that I didn’t even have time to ask him about his day,” he hears Dazai say once the lights are off.

Chuuya snorts, his fingers pausing in their ministrations of ghosting over his skin to pinch Dazai. The pouncing part isn’t exactly a lie. He simply wasn’t the only one doing it. “Like you have ever asked me about my day.”

Dazai mock-gasps in offense. “I *always* ask about your day.” When all Chuuya does is raise his brows, though, he sighs, making a face. “Fine. But maybe since we’re… an item now, I should start, right? Isn’t that

what other people do as well?"

"An item."

"Do you prefer *baes?* Squishes? Lovers? Sweetheart—"

"How about," Chuuya says, cutting off his impressive show-off of synonyms by sliding his arms around him and dragging him closer until he can press his lips against Dazai's neck when he speaks, "just sticking to boyfriends?"

"Boyfriends," Dazai repeats as if testing the word. "How boring for such two extraordinary people."

Chuuya would argue that they're just like everyone else, but that would be grandly understating it. Nothing about this is really normal.

"Gotta keep a balance, right?"

Dazai squirms with Chuuya abusing his poor, sensitive neck, yet he doesn't move away. Instead, he tangles his fingers in Chuuya's hair, letting them drive through his locks. "Guess so. So how was your day?"

"Oh, you were serious about that."

"I am serious about everything I do."

"Yeah," Chuuya rolls his eyes before pulling away to prop himself up on one hand so he can watch Dazai lying there, hair a complete mess, neck full of red marks that Chuuya would be embarrassed by if he didn't like seeing them so much. He never had the chance to be a high schooler who's in love and wants to show the world. He gets to make up in lost time now. "It was fine. Kouyou talked about you."

Dazai's brows tug together as he most likely tries to puzzle together who she is out of all the names that Chuuya has mentioned in the mafia. "Kouyou. That's your mentor?"

"Yeah, she took me under her wing when I joined."

"You talk to her about me?" Dazai asks, and he's wearing this goofy, lop-sided smile that looks like it's trying to mock Chuuya, except he just looks flustered in the best way possible.

"Don't get too excited," Chuuya huffs, even if he feels kind of bad for crushing that idea. "Kouyou's the one who told me we've been spotted

together in the first place. I… don't talk to any of my co-workers like that. No mixing business with my private life."

"And yet you were fine sleeping with one of them," Dazai points out airily.

"That was different."

"How so?"

"It was just sex. Nothing more than pleasure and stress relief. Talking about *you*… that's a whole other caliber."

For a few moments, Dazai only looks at him, his expression unreadable. Chuuya is okay with that. Getting to admire his pretty face isn't so bad.

"So," Dazai says after a while, voice coming out too quick and too uneven to mask whatever confusing thing must have gone on inside him, "what did your Kouyou say about me?"

"Ah, well, she said our boss is probably looking into you."

Dazai's shoulders straighten. "He is?"

"Yup," Chuuya shrugs, "but he's not going to find anything crazy, so it'll be all right."

"You talk like you have looked into me as well."

Chuuya shoots him a smirk. "You really think I didn't look into your life after you barged into my apartment twice in a row?"

"You always ask about things," Dazai points out. "Shouldn't you know everything about me then?"

"A few school reports, your medical history, and the places you lived at are hardly everything. And I ask because I care and because I do want to know."

Dazai blinks, then pillows his chin on his hands, gaze drifting away. "I'm sorry."

"For… for what?"

"For not telling you anything. I know a lot about you, you know."

“Hey, just because I want to know stuff doesn’t mean you have to tell me.” Chuuya covers an incoming yawn with his palm before placing the same hand on Dazai’s arm to give him a squeeze. “There are things I don’t want to talk about either.”

Dazai is quiet for a while, letting Chuuya draw constellations into his skin over and over. By the time he speaks again, Chuuya’s not sure where they stopped. “You know that I grew up in the countryside then?”

“Yeah. I read that, but you told me that yourself.”

“Right. Well, the people I grew up with… they didn’t like me very much.”

Chuuya lets out a slow breath and waits.

“My father didn’t want me, so he gave me to his parents. They were poor, overworked, and miserable. I was just another mouth to feed, and,” Dazai lets out a soft snort, “a pretty useless pair of hands, at that. Too sick to help them with work. Too troubled at school. Too weird because of my ability.” His eyes lift to meet Chuuya’s in the moon light that shines inside their room. “I think you can imagine how delighted they were when I finally left for college.”

Chuuya smiles. It’s a sad smile. “Yeah.”

“They weren’t that bad,” Dazai says, raising himself up on his elbow. “The worst thing about that place were the neighbors. They saw a lonely, weird kid, and they… knew that no one would care if he came back disheveled one day. They just took.”

Chuuya’s chest fills with so many emotions at once that his vision blurs for a second. Mostly it’s heavy, suffocating anger, though. So much of it that it hurts to breathe.

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this,” Dazai admits quietly. “I’ve never wanted to share that with anyone. It’s not like it would change anything, right? But telling you doesn’t feel wrong. It doesn’t feel good, but it doesn’t feel bad either.”

“You don’t have to have a reason with me,” Chuuya murmurs.

“So I can just tell you the first thing that pops into my head? All the time?”

“Yeah.”

Chuuya knows a thing or two about well-kept secrets, ones you want to keep hidden because they are too ugly in the light, ones don’t dare to touch because it hurts too much. You think it’s fine because no one will know, you’ll deal with them, except they start to fester.

Like untreated wounds that can turn a scab into an infection.

Dazai lets out a long breath, eyes fluttering shut and open like it’s all a little heavy and exhausting right now. His finger draws a line between the two of them. “Everyone needs a reason.”

Chuuya’s immediate response is *no. He doesn’t want one. He doesn’t need one.*

But this isn’t just about him.

“Let’s just go to sleep,” Dazai ends up saying before Chuuya can reply with anything, curling up on himself but not without reaching out to grab Chuuya’s hands first, interlacing their fingers. “My brain actually feels tired for once.”

Chuuya squeezes him and crawls closer, sliding his knee between Dazai’s thighs. “This okay?”

Next to him, Dazai lets out a content, little hum.

It takes Chuuya longer to fall asleep than the usual hit the bed and clock the fuck out routine since a thousand different things run through his mind. Things about Dazai. About Yosano and her situation with Dostoevsky. The guild Mori. Kouyou. His friends. Colorful realizations as loud as fireworks. Worries that leave him holding onto Dazai tighter than necessary, tighter than he should. Memories he would have somewhat forgotten. He feels the heartbeat under his palm and wonders whether it’s real.

When he eventually falls asleep, he dreams of holding on so tightly that he crushes glass.

“How do I look?”

“Bossy,” Dazai replies, only lifting his eyes long enough to pretend he even bothered looking before returning them to his book.

“Hot,” Chuuya says and nods at the outfit she’s wearing. “I love the

coat."

Hands resting on her hips, Yosano shoots Oda an expectant look, tilting her head.

Oda clears his throat. "You look lovely. Where are you going?"

"I'm having lunch with Dostoevsky."

All three of their heads snap to her. Chuuya tosses his iPad to the side to put all his attention into glowering. "Seriously?"

"What?" Rolling her eyes, Yosano lifts one foot to rip off a remaining price tag from the sole of her new boots, arrived just yesterday. "I told you the best way is to work with him, not against him."

"And what if it's a trap?" Dazai asks.

"That's why I want to borrow your bodyguard for a day. Actually, make that all three of you. You will be sitting at the table behind me, and if something's off, we'll know." She offers them a brilliant smile. "So I hope you're all hungry, boys. Fyodor-kun is a smart man."

Back in their bedroom — because, let's face it, it has somehow turned into *theirs,* as in belonging to the two of them — Dazai insists that he needs to look *different* so that no one will recognize him. Chuuya doesn't have the heart to tell him that no one will, though he's sure Dazai knows, simply enjoying the dramatics of it all.

"I've always wanted to be part of an undercover mission," he tells Chuuya as he considers an awful Hawai shirt before tossing it back to the rack. "Can we go by different names? I want to be called *Stalking Neptune*."

Chuuya snorts. "I'm not calling you that."

For a moment, there is only the sound of clothes being inspected. "I am surprised Chuuya hasn't had a panic attack about endangering my fragile safety yet."

Well.

"I'm not a fan of getting you involved with some fucking Russian mafia boss," he admits, tightening the belt around his waist, "but it's your choice."

He knows how hypocritical that sounds considering how much effort

he put into keeping Dazai away from that part of life, but being close to someone dangerous and joining a crime syndicate are worlds apart. There's a difference there.

"So you don't want me there."

Chuuya exhales through his nose, cranes his neck to be able to look at Dazai and gauge his expression, see whether it's a *tell me I'm wrong* kind of statement or something to actually worry about. "I do want you there. I always want you there."

"Oh." Dazai's eyes are colored with surprise, but that wide-eyed look of genuine disbelief vanishes. There and gone in an instant. "Even now?"

"Yeah, idiot, even now."

"But I'm right here."

"Well, maybe I'd like you to come closer."

Chuuya can't help but grin when Dazai makes a face, attempting to play coy as he refuses to budge. "If you want me that bad, then why don't you come over?"

"Because I can't have you in my lap when we're both standing."

"Hm. I guess you make a fair point."

Amused, Chuuya watches Dazai take his sweet time letting go of the shirt he was inspecting, closing the closet and turn around, folding his hands behind his back. For someone who always complains about teasing, Dazai sure seems to like doing it himself. His steps are clumsier than usual as he walks over to Chuuya but it doesn't matter, not when Chuuya is already reaching out to grab his waist and pull him on his lap for a dizzying kiss.

"Want me to do your hair?" he asks, playing with the tips of his chocolate-brown bangs.

"Actually, I was thinking of something else." When Chuuya raises his brows in question, Dazai keeps his eyes on the wall instead, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. "You did that thing yesterday before work. The one that made your skin look all pretty and smooth."

"You mean concealer?"

“Yes, the retoucher thing.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says and inspects Dazai’s face for a moment. “Your skin’s perfect, though. It’s usually done to cover up zits and redness.”

Dazai looks at him, mouth parting. “Heh, I don’t want that exactly. I was thinking of something like… eyeshadow? But if not, I can ask Yosano. I’m sure she —”

“Don’t be stupid. I’ll do it.”

Feeling nice, Chuuya doesn’t give him enough room nor time to get embarrassed all over again. Instead, he gives him a quick peck before getting up to get his make-up bag out of the bathroom.

Dazai waits patiently on the bed, his hands folded in his lap when he returns.

“Most of my palettes are really dark and dramatic,” he tells him, opening one on cue and showing Dazai his options. “Not sure what kind of look you’re going for, but if you want something lighter —”

“This one.” Dazai points at the wine-red color in the middle row. “I don’t want to look like a raccoon, but something darker… but also something subtle... “

“Glitter?”

“No.”

Chuuya nods, getting an idea of what Dazai wants, then he nudges Dazai to scoot back on the bed with one knee. Dazai does. Yet Chuuya still feels him suck in a fleeting breath when Chuuya, more or less, settles on his lap, palette, and brush in hand.

“Easier that way,” he says in way of explaining.

“Or Chuuya just wanted a reason to mount me.”

Chuuya hums. “Maybe I did.”

Dazai’s chest shudders under him, and the only reason Chuuya’s able to hold his smile is that he wants his work to be perfect.

“Is this a thing you learn in the mafia?” Dazai asks after a while. “Or is this a Chuuya thing?”

“Both, I guess. Kouyou and her girls taught me; ’s pretty useful for undercover missions, but I would have gotten into it at some point anyway, I’m sure. It’s fun and it looks good.”

“Her *girls*?” Dazai questions, voice a little breathy.

“She runs a brothel.”

“Oh. Those undercover missions. Were they at the brothel too?” It’s not precisely anger, not anything quite as loud as dislike either, but his voice is vicious. It cuts.

Chuuya leans away to inspect his handiwork so far, using the opportunity to shoot Dazai the faint ghost of a passing smile. “Some of them, yeah.”

He didn’t care back then. Everything felt so pointless, so wrong and suffocating in the mafia that getting assigned to gather intel by getting into bed with some old, wealthy guy whose breath reeks of expensive whiskey and rotten teeth left him pretty much unfazed. Even when he got to kill some of them afterward, put his hands around their necks the same way they had done it to him and watch the life drain out of their eyes. Only years later did Chuuya even realize how much he didn’t want to do any of that. How wrong it felt, and how deep that invisible wound ran. But by then, it didn’t matter anymore. Chuuya was an executive. He was one of the best. He was pretty much Mori’s right-hand man.

What more could he have possibly wanted?

“This life had a price,” he says with a punched-out smile, only daring himself to look at Dazai for a few fleeting seconds before redirecting his attention to the work at hand.

The rest doesn’t take long, isn’t filled with words anymore either, but Dazai settles his hands on Chuuya’s hips and doesn’t really let go until they’re finished.

“All done and ready to turn heads,” Chuuya says, brushing away a particle of eyeshadow dust on Dazai’s cheek.

Dazai presses his lips together, lashes batting coyly. “Do I turn your head?”

“You make it spin.” Chuuya’s fingers run through the unkempt mess of Dazai’s hair, eliciting a shuddery breath. “If you weren’t already living

here, I'd ask you to move in so I could look at your pretty face every day."

"Now Chuuya's just trying to make me squirm..."

"What can I say? I like —"

Three aggressively loud knocks cut through the room before the door swings open. Yosano looks unimpressed by their position as she flips her hand through the air. "Could the love birds take off the rose-colored glasses and read the fucking clock?"

"We'll be right there," Chuuya says.

"Yeah, you better."

When the door closes again, Chuuya lets out a sigh and tucks a few strands of hair behind Dazai's ear. "Guess we shouldn't keep her waiting."

"No, we shouldn't," Dazai agrees. "She threatened me with a chainsaw last week, and I don't think it was a joke."

Chuuya's still grinning when his lips slide against Dazai's because he's weak and hopelessly besotted, and not even a million kisses could ever still the pit of hunger in his stomach.

Dazai fusses with his shirt, then his pants, clearly trying to stall to come out of the bedroom and being seen, so Chuuya takes his hand before opening the door, and, at least, Dazai just relaxes enough to focus on one thing at a time.

In the hallway, Yosano's inspecting her make-up in the mirror, Oda slipping into his shoes, and there are no comments about their joined hands nor clothes as all of them get ready to go. It's only downstairs after the elevator doors slide open and they step out that Yosano elbows Dazai and huffs, "Trying to outshine me, lover boy?"

It makes him grin, all teeth and sunshine and summer wind, and Chuuya doesn't think he ever felt his heart dance as much as in that moment.

The restaurant is more casual than Chuuya expected for a mafia don, trendy chalkboards hanging on the walls, and saltwater aquariums in every corner. It's a wise choice to keep any shady attempts to a minimum with that many civilians nearby even though, Chuuya has

no doubts at least half of them are bodyguard staff as well.

The three of them and Yosano used different exits in Chuuya's building and arrived in separate cars and at different times. The table Yosano and Dostoevsky are supposed to sit at is still empty when Chuuya, Dazai, and Oda get led to theirs.

Chuuya makes sure Dazai and him sit down with their backs to Yosano's table. Dostoevsky doesn't have to actually ever see Dazai's face, least of all remember it.

"I didn't know we're going to a seafood restaurant," Chuuya hears Dazai grumble upon opening the menu cards.

Chuuya shoots him an amused frown. "You literally eat canned crab all the fucking time."

"Well, it's not canned here!"

"Yeah, it's not because it's actually prepared here and, like, ten thousand times *better."*

"I'll just order some sushi."

Chuuya scans the menu before sliding it over to Dazai, stabbing a finger at the pictures of the blue crap miso soup. "Try this one. It's —" They're pressed shoulder to shoulder — not necessarily because there isn't enough room but because Chuuya sometimes forgets there is such a thing as personal space when he's around Dazai — which is why he feels the exact moment Dazai goes as still as a frozen lake, time slowing down for a millisecond.

Chuuya's eyes snap up to the two people passing their table. Yosano, carrying a studied smile, and Dostoevsky. He's half a head taller than her, shoulder-long violet-black hair and a strange air around him.

The moment, the rigor next to him melts away, Yosano and the Russian have already passed them.

"— 's pretty good," Chuuya finishes and scans Dazai's face for any lingering tension. There's nothing but a bright, pouty grin that has the breeziness of a dandelion.

"I guess I *can* try, but you can't yell at me if I get sick afterward."

"You won't get sick from a properly cooked dish, idiot."

“I have a very sensitive stomach!”

“Just tell them not to over spice is,” Oda butts in, “and you’ll be fine.”

Dazai’s cheeks puff in flamboyant over-the-top displeasure, but he ends up ordering the soup anyway.

The tables have enough space between them to keep the conversations happening private, so Chuuya doesn’t hear anything that Yosano discusses with Dostoevsky. Whatever it is, though, it takes nearly one and a half hours. But considering that Oda spends the entire meal eating contentedly and the most dangerous thing that happens is the risk of his pants bursting because of the three additional plates that he orders, it must be going fairly well.

Chuuya feels relief bleed out of his spine when Oda gives him a subtle nod, signaling that the dinner behind them is coming to an end. So much relief that he’s about to suggest ordering drinks except that ocean-thick tension fills the air again as a demon passes them, and this time —

This time Fyodor Dostoevsky pauses, a gleeful smile splitting his face when he does.

“It’s good to see you again, Osamu. It’s been a while.”

The world shifts around them, sending Chuuya’s mind free-falling into empty space, like the sensation of missing the last step on the stairs or climbing up an escalator that doesn’t move.

Osamu.

Osamu.

Osamu.

Chuuya balls his hands into fists, every muscle inside him tense and ready to go at any given moment as he bares his teeth, but before he can get out a single word, let alone stand up, a hand settles on his thigh. The first flickers of his ability wash away, and with it, the primal instinct to tear apart the man leering at Dazai with hooded, violet eyes.

“I can’t say the same, Fyodor-kun. What are you doing in the city? Shouldn’t you be out ruining people’s days in Saint Petersburg?”

Chuuya barely manages to keep his expression blank. *What the fuck.*

“I was here to meet a friend. Something you wouldn’t understand, of course.” His gaze snobbishly travels over Chuuya and Oda before producing the most perfunctory smile. “Tell me. Did you pay these people to spend time with you?”

“Actually, *I* pay *him* to look pretty and entertain me,” Chuuya cuts in with a smile that’s not very nice, leaning back in his seat, which coincidentally allows Dostoevsky a look of Dazai’s hand on his palm. “So why don’t you move along? You’re ruining the pretty view.”

As confused as he is right now, Chuuya will *never* let some fucking foreigner speak down on Dazai like that.

Chuuya is the only one who gets to bully him, and that’s because he actually fucking cares about that damn boy.

If Dostoevsky even registers the insult, he doesn’t let it show, humming airily before giving Dazai one last once-over and walking away.

The silence he leaves in its wake is explosive, every breath risking a trigger-reaction.

And Chuuya — he wants to fucking go off. He certainly *can* with all the conflicting emotions walloping inside him. He wants to, except he *doesn’t* because this is Dazai, and he doesn’t want to fight at him or yell or have any reason to distrust him but —

But Dostoevsky said *Osamu.* He said that *it’s been a while.*

The chair makes an ugly creaking sound when Chuuya jumps to his feed.

Oda puts away his napkin. “I’ll cover the bill.”

Chuuya only bothers enough to nod before walking off, knowing that Dazai will follow anyway because as he wouldn’t let Chuuya have the last word. Stubborn asshole that he is.

Dazai catches up when they’re outside in front of the car.

Funnily enough, Chuuya feels like he landed in one of those dramas he occasionally watches — storming off, getting chased, a screaming match in the parking lot, and maybe to top it all off, the rain will start

coming down any minute now for the epic conclusion.

Except that Chuuya won't yell.

Even if he wants to.

He just… needs a minute.

Scrubbing a hand across his face, Chuuya gets in the car. It takes a minute or two for Dazai to climb inside as well, the door falling shut with a soft thud before he looks at Chuuya, then glances away and shoves his hands between his thighs.

"Did you know?" Chuuya asks.

"Hm?"

"Did you know?" he repeats. "Who Dostoevsky was before we came here? That you knew him?"

"No."

Chuuya nods. *Okay.* That's good. That's something. "So, how *do* you know him?"

Dazai sighs and leans back against the seat. "I met him when I was a kid. Several times." He shrugs. "I only knew him as Theodore. Theo." As soon as he says that, his brows morph into a glare directed at no one but himself. "And I realize how stupid that sounds in hindsight. Theodore — " He flips his hand back and forth. "— Fyodor. Fyodor. Theodor. *But* I was a kid. *He* was a kid when I last saw him. I haven't thought about him in years. So no, I didn't know."

It's hard to believe coming from Dazai. Someone who isn't very prone to just *forget* details and fail to make a connection.

He's still human, though, and aside from that, it makes sense. Well, most of it anyways.

"As a kid," Chuuya repeats to make sure he heard right. "Was he one of the people from the country? One of *those?"* Because if —

"No." Dazai gives him a small smile. "No, that was before. Our parents knew each other. It was like… a play date."

Chuuya supposes that would explain why all of this is an epic coincidence.

Usually, he doesn't believe in those.

When you work in the mafia, you're not allowed to believe in those. Or you'll risk overlooking an enemy for the sake of simplicity.

But this is Dazai.

It's *Dazai*.

"So I guess you didn't know he was mafia back then either," Chuuya concludes out loud, raising an eyebrow.

Dazai chuckles. "I didn't even know what mafia meant back then, Chuuya. And honestly, I'm not even sure he was already part of that. There are many ways to get to the top of the chain. Not all of them through nepotism."

Chuuya blinks.

Yeah.

He supposes he, as Mori's right-hand man, should know that best. After all, that's how the boss secured his position eight years ago. By murdering the old boss and making sure no one else would be there to take the place. No one but himself.

"I did recognize him as soon as he walked in," Dazai continues, "but I was going to tell you later."

That makes sense, too.

Chuuya would hve been able to play it cool, but he would have done the same thing if he was in Dazai's position. Tell him later. Avoid any suspicious glances.

It all checks out.

Chuuya exhales and closes his eyes for a few seconds, nodding.

(It's just that the pressure around his ribcage doesn't ease. Not entirely.)

"So, are you still mad?" Dazai asks.

"I wasn't mad. I was just confused."

"Chuuya did want to punch me. I could see it in your eyes."

“I didn’t,” Chuuya mutters, exhaling through his nose, “but I just might.”

“Well, then I demand a kiss,” Dazai says and leans over, smiling brightly. “End this fight with a kiss. Wait, was this our first official fight? That happened rather quickly, to be honest.”

“You’re so fucking annoying.”

“So you *are* mad.”

Chuuya grabs Dazai’s collar and yanks him close for a kiss. It’s not as soft as the ones they’ve shared before, all teeth, tongue and too many feelings. When he pulls away, Dazai is looking at him with frazzled, wide eyes, and Chuuya pushes him away with a hand, a smile stretching on his lips despite that lumbering weight in the pit of his stomach.

“Now, let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

and the plot THICKENS

Chapter 11: Sugar

Chapter Notes

content warnings:
- explicit sexual content in the first half of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What exactly are we looking for?”

Chuuya tries his best not to hold onto his last shred of patience as Atsushi asks this question for the umpteenth time. The kid’s not dumb, per se — actually, he’s been doing pretty good, all circumstances considered. He’s just a little slow with regaining information. Then again, the mafia *is* not exactly a simple organization.

“Anything we have on the Russians. The Dostoevskys. Fyodor Dostoevsky — try Theodore Dostoevsky, too.”

Atsushi nods before tilting his head, clearly not any brighter than before. “And why are we doing this?”

“Are you questioning your superior?” Akutagawa asks.

Blanching, the weretiger shakes his head. “N-no! I’m just curious because the guild has been attacking us on every…” He trails off when all Akutagawa does is stare blankly at him and hurries over to one of the shelves filled with documentation files. “I’ll get to work.”

As soon as he’s out of earshot, that unimpressed glare gets redirected at Chuuya. “Why are we doing this?”

“Listen to your own advice, buddy, and don’t question your superiors,” he mutters in reply as he goes for the desk instead.

They’re in the port mafia’s archives looking for anything related to Dostoevsky.

Aside from that little incident with Dazai, it couldn’t have gone more smoothly, according to Yosano. They made an agreement to work together to take out the people who ordered the assassination, plus another three months of work afterwards. So, for now, Yosano is in the clear.

Words from men they don't know can only be trusted so much, though.

Something can go wrong. Dostoevsky can change his mind. They might even fail to find the wire puller, and then what? So right now, Chuuya's looking for something to get them insurance. And well, maybe something to kill the curiosity that has been residing in him ever since that day.

However, he has a better excuse at hand.

"In times like this, alliances are gold mines," Chuuya tells Akutagawa, settling down on the chair. "And since the Russians are in town anyway, we might as well consider getting them on our side before the fucking Americans can."

"Whatever you say," Akutagawa says.

What isn't a gold mine is *this*.

The archives only really started blossoming with the aid of Ango Sakaguchi. Sure, the mafia's, above all a business organization, and the structure that supports it is bureaucracy, so some papers date back longer than four years. Most of them are scarce of any useful information, though. It was with Ango that the mafia started archiving. Even after he left, another mafioso responsible for intel took over the job.

And as lovely as it is that they can find the names of every mafioso that breathed in room 3C on the 23rd floor two years ago, it's not much use to Chuuya when the information he's looking for dates back much, much later than that.

"I have a Russian ability user," Atsushi announces after a while, frowning at the files in front of him. "Oh, she actually works here."

"Name?" Chuuya demands.

"Alexandra Petuhova. Oh, wait."

"What?"

"She died last year."

Rubbing his forehead, Chuuya looks at Akutagawa, hoping that maybe he was more successful.

“I’m not sure what you expect me to find in bank statements,” Akutagawa mutters without looking up.

“Everything.” Chuuya gets up to snatch the files out of his hands. “Gimme that. Money’s the blood of the mafia. There will have to be something in there.”

“So what if you find something. How is that supposed to help us with our current situation?”

“We’ll know whether there has been bad blood, for one.”

Chuuya’s familiar with most of the information on the papers. Names of shell companies, investment funds, and affiliates that are, for the most part, still operating to this day.

Atsushi makes him look up with a slight frown over an unknown name when he approaches the desk and places a turquoise pendant there. “Found it hidden in a book.”

“Sure is pretty,” Chuuya murmurs, picking it up to inspect it. “Just not what we are looking for.” The way Atsushi pointedly watches Chuuya pocket it anyway makes him click his tongue. “I got a pampered brat at home. *Go on,* Atsushi-kun.”

They don’t find much more than that. A few dirty Russian politicians laundering money with the help of the port mafia. All of them dead or imprisoned by now, though. Exports of Russian weapons — however, sold by some Ukrainian rogue gangs. Some receipts that don’t lead anywhere but fruitless dead-ends.

He takes home some of the bank statements to look into some of the names he *doesn’t* recognize.

The devil is in the details, after all.

Chuuya has the strange urge to call, “*honey, I’m home”* as soon as he enters his apartment, but for the sake of keeping himself off the bullying radar for now — getting *off* was a hard-fought war, as it is — he bites his tongue.

Peculiar TV sounds are coming from the living room, so that’s where Chuuya goes after getting rid of a few dozen layers of clothing.

The sight is just as peculiar. If not, a lot more.

“What are you guys doing?”

Dazai looks positively ruffled, hair glistening at the roots and sticking up every which way, and the skirt — because yes, he’s wearing a white tennis skirt — allows for a beautiful sight of his mile-long legs. They’re bare, too, no bandages, and Chuuya has to dig his nails into this palm to keep himself from sniffling with cheesy, emotional pride.

“We’re playing Wii! Wanna join us?”

“Nah,” Chuuya says, breaching the distance to give Dazai a quick kiss before letting himself fall down on the couch. “You’re all a bunch of freeloaders, you know that?”

“Technically, you asked us to move in,” Oda points out as he hits his controller, “and being Dazai’s bodyguard is my job.”

“I offered to pay my share, but you gave me the death glare and threatened to poison my wine,” Yosano says with a shrug.

Yeah, that happened. Chuuya figured worrying about money should be the least of her problems with Dostoevsky out to get her — before their new deal, of course. It’s not like he hasn’t been paying rent out of his own pocket for years, or, you know, not like he couldn’t buy himself a few dozen more penthouses with all the blood money he has earned in the last few years of being an executive.

Out of the three of them, that leaves Dazai, who only offers a sweet little grin and a shrug. “We all know Chuuya keeps me around because he likes me. My amazing personality *is* my rent.”

The sad thing is that he’s not even lying.

And it’s not sad at all.

Chuuya watches them play for the next half hour, cheering on Dazai when he epically loses against Oda and Yosano, who make an excellent team, to no one’s surprise.

(He and Dazai already have a bet going on how long that’s going to take.

Chuuya says not more than a month because, seriously, that’s Yosano they’re talking about.

Dazai’s mysteriously confident that it will take, at least, several more

months since Oda seems to carry some baggage. Not the physical kind either.)

The two of them disperse after a while, though, Oda leaving on personal business and Yosano — Chuuya's not going to lie, his mind pretty much shuts off and morphs into a caveman's peanut brain the minute Dazai starts swaying his cute little ass back and forth before plopping himself down in Chuuya's lap and looping his arms around him.

"So as your *boyfriend*," Dazai says, (Chuuya likes that word more and more, but especially out of Dazai's mouth), "it is my diligent duty to ask you how your day has been."

"Oh, you know, the usual. Paperwork. Phone calls. Boring meetings."

"Even while Americans are trying to burn down the city to get a person?"

"I told you," Chuuya shrugs, twirling one of Dazai's loose locks around his index finger and tugging him forward for a kiss, hoping it will get him to shut up about work because his Dostoevsky research makes him feel somewhat guilty. "'s more boring than you realize. What about you?"

Dazai tries to kiss him again, blinking sluggishly when Chuuya doesn't let him just yet. "I spent some time reading."

"What'd you read?"

"Society rejects playing —"

Chuuya scoffs. "You read that weeks ago. Shouldn't you be finished by now?"

"I'm rereading it." And then he adds in a sheepish tone, "I might have formed an emotional attachment to it. I feel… nice when I read it. Like when I'm with you."

It's like the heart inside Chuuya's chest tears into two, which is illogical because he isn't *sad*. He's just so wholly and awfully —

In love.

He's *in love*.

And it's both the best and the worst thing that has ever happened to

him because Chuuya's not sure how he is supposed to ever feel whole again after getting a taste of this real, tangible happiness, after knowing what it's like to have lightning trapped in his body that dances in his stomach and rushes through his veins, and everything feels so sickeningly *good* that he could go the rest of his life without having a single bite of food.

"You're awful," Chuuya tells Dazai in-between kisses that turn slower and deeper with each time.

It takes a while for Dazai to reply, too busy responding to each slide of their lips with more energy and enthusiasm that he rarely brings up with anything else, not even when a knife was being held against his throat during their first encounter. Even after Chuuya takes pity on him and decides to nibble on his jaw instead, Dazai still spends a considerable amount of time squirming in his lap, probably trying to gather his thoughts before he finally manages to speak. "Heh… Chuuya doesn't make any... sense."

No, he doesn't.

Nothing makes sense when Chuuya's feeling like *this*.

"Hey, I got something for you," he says instead and slides his hand into the back pocket of his trousers.

Attention successfully caught, Dazai watches curiously, and his lips form a tiny *o* when Chuuya finally fishes out the pendant he basically stole from the archives.

Dazai opens his palm, and Chuuya places the turquoise stone in it, letting him inspect it on his own.

"You said your favorite color is blue. I know it's technically *turquoise,* but if you squint —"

Dazai closes his hand, and before Chuuya can ask whether he doesn't like it, he smacks a kiss to his mouth. "Thank you. I… I've never gotten a present before."

"Seriously?" Chuuya asks, sliding his arms around Dazai and trying to drag him closer even though that's probably physically impossible at this point. "I bought you, like, clothes worth hundreds of thousands of yen."

"But *I* picked them out," Dazai argues as his fingers play with the

collar on Chuuya's shirt. "Chuuya only paid. And he was drunk."

"I don't need to be drunk to buy you things, sweetheart."

"How generous. Is this Chuuya offering me to be my sugar daddy?"

Chuuya smothers his dry snort against Dazai's lips. They taste sweet like strawberry-flavored chapstick as he slowly lets them fall forward so that Dazai's lying on his back and staring up at him with half-lidded, amused eyes. "Why not? I'm sure the word *sir* out of your mouth would sound cute."

Dazai swallows and lets Chuuya kiss him, nice and deep, although he pushes him away with a light touch on his chest after a few moments.

"Is everything —"

"I'm fine," Dazai reassures him quickly. "I'm just thinking that if you are my sugar daddy, then I'm your sugar baby. Correct?"

"I guess," Chuuya replies with a frazzled frown.

"Then I," Dazai continues and wiggles out of under him and down to the floor, grabbing Chuuya's thighs to rearrange them into a sitting position, "should give you some sugar. *Sir."*

Oh.

Chuuya has a feeling he knows where this is going.

"And what exactly are you thinking of?" he asks nonetheless even as Dazai settles down cross-legged between his thighs with a mischievous look that makes Chuuya's heart slam in his chest.

"I could blow you."

Chuuya isn't surprised to hear these words, but they still send a bolt of heat up his spine. Fuck, Dazai looks so unashamed suggesting it as if he's talking about baking him a fucking cake.

But Chuuya has to be rational about this.

"You sure? You're —"

"Yes, yes, I'm a blushing virgin," Dazai mutters, slapping Chuuya's hand that's resting on his thigh away to replace it with his elbows before he goes to work on the belt around Chuuya's hips. "But I've

consumed my fair share of porn *and* I practiced."

Chuuya inhales sharply. "Where the hell have you been practicing?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, mafia boy?" Dazai asks and flashes him a smug smirk.

Well, it's not like getting a blowjob is a *burden* or anything. Chuuya's definitely not going to go out of his way to stop Dazai, and if that's what he *wants* —

"And…" Dazai murmurs to himself once he has successfully wrestled off belt and trousers, looking at Chuuya's crotch and his half-hard dick still neatly hidden under his grey briefs. "... I really like your cock."

Chuuya's throat is all but dry at this point. He's not sure how he's supposed to live the rest of his life with the image of Dazai sucking his fucking dick imprinted on his mind.

And Dazai just looks so fucking eager when he slides his fingers under the waistband and drags them down his legs like he's unpacking his presents on Christmas eve.

The thought of whether they should be doing this in the living room of all places only occurs to Chuuya when his dick is out. "Fuck, wait. Is Yosano in her room or —"

"Gone to check up on a patient," Dazai tells him breezily, and Chuuya sighs loudly when his beautiful, delicate fingers wrap around his cock. That one touch alone, even if it's dry and slow, make him fill out in his hand. Fast. "Odasaku will be gone for two hours, max, too, so…" The little bastard intentionally leans closer so that Chuuya can feel his breath ghost over his dick when he says, "we have the apartment allll to ourselves right now."

Chuuya feels like he's going to die.

He doesn't, though, so instead, he relaxes back against the couch. No matter how much *practice* Dazai thinks he's gotten — and fuck, Chuuya's pretty sure his cock twitches at the image that pops up: of Dazai shoving his own fingers down his throat, or even better, a toy — it's still his first time doing this, still different from being with someone else rather than alone, and he should know that he's in control. At least, right now.

Dazai being Dazai, of course, thinks pointing that out is good

conversation material. “Chuuya, you’re twitching.” His fingers squeeze Chuuya lightly before giving him a long stroke up, swiping his thumb over the tip and smearing the drop of pre-come down his length and over the metal bars of his piercings. “Do you like seeing me on my knees for you?”

Chuuya wants to act like this is dirty talk because it does make his head spin in ten different directions, but the curious shimmer his boyfriend’s eyes looks *innocent* and *genuine,* of all things, and somehow that makes the flutter in his guts even sharper.

“You’re pretty,” he replies. “Even prettier with my cock in your hands.”

Dazai gives him a flick of his wrist when he reaches the head of his cock, making Chuuya exhale sharply, and then does it again with the next stroke. “What about my mouth then?”

“Gimme a visual and I’ll give you an answer,” Chuuya breathes out, voice far too raspy for the tame ministrations to his cock. It’s barely even a handjob, and yet he already feels rock-hard and desperate, and it’s all Dazai’s fault. The things he’s doing to Chuuya…

Eyes shining, Dazai scoots closer, his fist working a few paces faster than before so that when more precome blurts up, he leans in and licks it away. His warm tongue drags against his slit. Chuuya can’t help but reach out and slide his fingers through his hair because —

“You’re doing so good,” he murmurs and rubs his thumb across the line where Dazai’s forehead meets hair. “So pretty.”

Dazai’s gaze meets him as he gives his cock another lick, this time swirling his tongue around the head of his cock and down the vein that pulses with each hot gust of breath that meets sensitive skin, dipping between his piercings.

“Can I.. say something?” Chuuya asks after a few moments.

Dazai lets out a soft breath against him. “More compliments or advice?”

“Advice.”

“Mm, I guess I’ll allow it.”

Chuuya jerks his head towards his thighs, where Dazai’s keeping a

snug hold of them. “You can use your hand at the same time.”

“Oh,” Dazai says and blinks down down them as if he completely forget that they exist. Then he makes a fist around the base of his cock and nods, more to himself than anyone. It’s cute. So cute that Chuuya feels a buoyant laugh bubble up in his throat even though it bleeds into a gasp when Dazai’s lips wrap around the cock of his head without any warning whatsoever.

“Ah, shit,” Chuuya’s fingers tighten in Dazai’s hair, careful not to pull or push or anything like that, and then he jerks. “Oi — watch the teeth.” Dazai’s snug hold around his cock softens, and he pulls away ever so slightly. “The teeth, Dazai.”

“Somehow, I did not have this problem when I planned this,” Dazai murmurs with an adorable grumpy frown. His expression when he aims it at Chuuya looks accusatory. “Chuuya, how am I supposed to get rid of my teeth?!”

Chuuya bites his cheek to stop himself from shaking with laughter. He’s sure Dazai wouldn’t appreciate that. “You just tuck ‘em behind your lips. See, like this.” He gives him a live demonstration.

However, Dazai looks wildly unconvinced of the whole thing. “But that gives me even less room than I already have.” He glares down at his hands and Chuuya’s dick. “And your cock is pretty big.”

“Well, you don’t have to —”

“I *want* to,” Dazai insists and juts out his chin stubbornly. “Stop patronizing me. I’m just telling you what’s in my head, and right now, I have serious doubts about the logistics of it, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to do it.”

“Okay.” Exhaling tension, Chuuya nods. “Okay, Dazai.”

“Good. Now shut up and let me do this.” Dazai bats his lashes, mouth curled into a bashful smirk. “*Sir*.”

Chuuya’s lungs stutter ever so slightly as he nods. “Good. Yeah. Okay. Do you want me to shut up altogether, or are the other things fine?” He’s vocal, and he likes telling his partners when they’re being good, likes how eager they get to please because he feels the same, there’s no denying it, but if Dazai wants him to keep quiet for now, then he’ll be quiet.

Dazai picks up the pace again and watches his fist work over Chuuya's cock greedily, refusing to look up, especially as he says, "the praise… it can get a bit much."

"Good much?" Chuuya's voice hitches when Dazai leans in and licks over his length, pausing to rub his tongue against the frenulum piercings again and again like his only intention is to drive him mad. "Or, ah, bad much?"

"Just… much. Too much. It makes me all fuzzy inside, and right now, I want to be able to focus on this." Chuuya's okay with that, but then, of course, Dazai has to go ahead and add, "you can be a little mean to me, though."

Chuuya bites his tongue before the *are you sure?* slips out. He wants to tell Dazai how good he is, how great he makes him feel, but if Dazai wants to hear the other side of that praise? Well, Chuuya can do that, too.

"You want me to tell you how much better your mouth would look stuffed with my cock?"

Dazai's thick lashes flutter over his cheeks as he hazily looks up at Chuuya and moves his lips over him, from a broad, flat-tongued lick to a wet, open-mouthed kiss, sucking on his frenulum.

"Fuck." Chuuya's head drops back against the couch. "You're really getting off on this, aren't you? Being bitched around?"

His reply is more slick wetness running down the length of him, a tongue swirling around his tip, and finally, the hot, wet heat of Dazai's mouth engulfing his cock, the head of it. This time, teeth safely tucked away.

"There you go," Chuuya groans. "Feels much better than using that mouth to talk shit all day long, don't you think?"

A low moan that Chuuya *feels* escapes Dazai as he sucks.

Chuuya's hips shudder with the effort it takes not to push them forward and fuck his mouth even if, given the newest revelations, Dazai would probably even *like* that.

Someday, but not today.

Chuuya doesn't even have to tell him that he can use his tongue like

that too; Dazai remembers all by himself and drags it against the cockhead in his mouth, then hollows his cheek to create more suction. What he lacks in experience, Dazai *definitely* makes up in sheer curiosity, trying many different things. Whenever he gets a twitch or a moan in reply, he repeats it over and over, slowly but surely driving Chuuya to an all-too-familiar yet entirely new edge of sensation.

Once Dazai must feel more comfortable with the size in his mouth, he starts getting eager. With a dangerous hum that reverberates through Chuuya's cock and goes straight to his balls, he attempts to take him deeper than before except that Chuuya expects him to swallow a few more inches, but Dazai, naturally trying to outdo himself, all but shoves himself almost all the way down and —

His throat muscles spasm and flutter around Chuuya, gag reflex kicking in. Something as uncomfortable as that shouldn't feel so fucking good. Yet, Chuuya finds himself half-groaning even as his fingers try to pull Dazai back by his hair.

"You — *don't* do that —"

Dazai looks *rough* when he glances up at him, eyes red-rimmed and glistening with wetness. His lips are swollen and red, the opposite picture of the boy Chuuya has become used to seeing every day.

"I said —" And if Dazai looks rough, then his voice is fucking *wrecked.* "— don't pa—"

"I don't fucking care what you said if you're just going to try choking yourself on my cock," Chuuya snaps.

Right now, Dazai's the 1:1 embodiment of a grumpy cat below him but he never, not even for one second, lets go of Chuuya's dick or stops moving his hand. He goes back to sucking his cock into his mouth with not something like enthusiasm but *vengeance* and stubborn determination to ignore Chuuya.

Chuuya's breath stills for a few seconds, waiting to see whether he needs to pull the idiot off again, but Dazai's more careful this time, still trying to get his cock deeper down his throat but being smart*er* about it this time.

The urge to yell about safety has to wait until later. Dazai does an excellent job of making Chuuya forget about it.

"You're so —" He lets his grip on Dazai's hair border on painful for a

moment or two before relaxing again. "— eager. What did you do the last few years? Spend all day dreaming about sucking cock? That why you're so greedy?"

Dazai releases a wet gasp around him, making spit run down the length of it. It smudges the pristine picture of him that Chuuya has in his head, makes him look dirty, a little nasty, all messed up and so eager to be used by him. Chuuya loves it. Loves him.

He slides his hand through Dazai's hair again and lets his hips meet his mouth just a tiny bit. "Bet you're already hard just from sucking me off too. Aren't you?"

Now *that* gets a reaction, and it would be criminal *not* to stretch one of his legs and blindly look for Dazai's crotch under his skirt, press his foot against it. The moment Dazai has something to grind against, his attempts turn even sloppier.

Chuuya wants to close his eyes, let himself fall into the storm of sensations ravaging his body right now, but he can drag his eyes away from the sight for the life of him. It's too good, too fucking hot, and Dazai's so into it and desperate as he rocks himself against Chuuya's foot and —

Dazai's hands stroke the lowest yet, thumb massaging his balls, and Chuuya loses it.

"Ah, fuck, Jesus," he hisses, "I'm gonna come, Dazai. I'm so close."

Dazai whines, deep and needy, when Chuuya forcefully drags him off his cock, only letting him suck hard at the head for a few white-hot blissed out moments before he gives his cock several final strokes and feels himself teeter over the edge with a jerk.

It feels a little like dying and flying all at once. Then Chuuya's coming, white ribbons of come landing on Dazai's face and dribble against his lips because Dazai never really stops, lapping at his tip even when Chuuya's muscles go slack with exertion.

His hand tightens in Dazai's hair one last time before he drags him away with a sigh, tired and satisfied and hazy with pride. The look he tries to find in Dazai is devastatingly frantic, though. His eyes are barely open, and he keeps nuzzling his cock, keeps grinding against the foot that's providing friction. Exhaling a soft curse under his breath, Chuuya increases the pressure on his cock so Dazai has something to rut again before he can return the favor and make him

come until he's stupid except —

Except that he's too fucking late.

Dazai lets out one breathless, guttural gasp, clinging to his thigh like a lifeline, and then he goes still. A wet spot forming on the briefs he's wearing when Chuuya pulls his foot away away.

"Shit," Chuuya breathes out, chest heaving up and down, as he leans down to get Dazai on the couch. It doesn't work because he's dead weight as he rests his head on Chuuya's thigh. "That was some sugar you gave me there."

"Heh. Tasted sweet like it, too."

Chuuya makes a face. Jizz doesn't exactly taste like icing on the cake, but if that's what Dazai likes to believe, then who is he to judge? "At least, get up here —"

"Nuh-uh," Dazai hums, clinging to his leg with one arm and using his free hand to trail his fingers over Chuuya's happy trail and lower like the menace he is. "I like it here just fine."

"You just want to ogle my dick," Chuuya says with a snort.

"You have a nice one."

"Well, you'll still get to have thousands of opportunities to admire it." Chuuya sounds whiny, even to his own ears, as he tugs on Dazai's hands to finally get him up here. "But I want to kiss you now."

"Chuuya's so needy ~ All right, all right. Let me just put that away."

He watches Dazai tuck his dick inside his pants and zip them up before he finally allows Chuuya to hoist him up in his lap, the smile on his face goofy and warm and wonderful.

"Thank you," Chuuya murmurs and pulls him in for a kiss that doesn't last long enough if you ask him because Dazai breaks it to laugh at him.

"Is Chuuya seriously thanking me for a blowjob?"

"It was a nice blowjob," Chuuya parrots him.

Dazai lightly slaps his chest, his smile lingering even as their mouths meet again. Chuuya can now see what Dazai meant about praise being

too much. So affected by genuine kindness. He's not sure whether he wants to kiss him stupid for it or wrap him up in a hug that will last until the end of their days.

There's the faint taste of himself on Dazai's tongue, sending a bolt of heat down his spine. If his thread of patience was any shorter, Chuuya would drag Dazai into their bedroom and fuck him exactly like he wants to right now. As it is, he thinks he can still hold off until a free weekend in the near future, hoping that he'll get one single night off to take Dazai to a hotel so they can take their time without any interruptions and awkward encounters with their room mates and so they can take it step by step and give Dazai the chance to savor every experience instead of rushing into all of it head-first.

"I'll get better," Dazai murmurs against his mouth, a competitive edge to his voice. "I'll be *the best."*

Chuuya hums, presses kisses down the line of his jaw. "Gonna need lots of practice then."

"Are you volunteering?"

"Yeah," Chuuya actually feels his heart flutter with their next kiss. Not only at the prospect of Dazai working on his deepthroating skills on him, but simply at this — this thing, this boy, this moment. Just this. He wants to keep it so desperately that it hurts. "Whatever it is," he says, "*yeah.*"

A few days later, Chuuya hears back from the intelligence guy he consulted to look over the names list. Someone who is, also, only loyal to numbers with the yen sign which means Mori or anyone else for that matter won't hear about it.

And Io and behold, the investor of one of the companies that *donated* a generous sum of money to a port mafia's shell company's foundation is none other than someone called *Maria Dostoevskaya.*

Or was.

She died seven years ago.

The same period Mori became the boss of the port mafia.

This means that before the old boss and Maria Dostoevskaya died, there was a connection between them, no matter how small. Not only

that, but the Russians were *here*, in Yokohama, so that Dazai's story checks out.

Knowing what he does, Chuuya's not even sure what exactly he's looking for himself. He just knows there's this *tug* in his chest, urging him to dig deeper, dig until his hands touch something solid.

That's why before his guy, Ueda, can walk away, Chuuya stops him. "I need you to find more about Dostoevskaya."

"What exactly?"

"Everything."

"Dude, I could bring you an entire encyclopedia, and it still wouldn't do shit. Give me something specific to work with."

Barely avoiding to roll his eyes, Chuuya sighs, flicking his hand in an irritated wave. "Everything about her relationship with the mafia. Every person she saw here. Every family that she let her child play with."

And, okay, the last one might border on prying into Dazai's life but — this *feeling.* Chuuya just needs to get rid of it once and for all. And then he'll be done with it. He'll let it go and move on.

But for now…

"Got it?"

"Yes, sir." That and the two-fingered salute from Ueda are nothing short of mocking. His skill makes up for the lack of manners, though, so Chuuya lets it slip.

He's tempted to get distracted and let his mind wander when he's back at work, but that would be a fatal mistake that Chuuya can't afford to do again. Ever since Akutagawa and Kaiji took out the guild's cargo ship, the Americans have been suspiciously quiet on the frontline, which means they are bound to attack sooner rather than later. The mafia has to keep their eyes sharp.

Thanks to the intel Kouyou gathered from that Montgomery girl, they've already dodged a few bullets. Still, much like the mafia, the guild has a hierarchy that doesn't involve keeping their low-ranking members in the picture of their plans, forcing the mafia to rely on other resources.

It keeps Chuuya not only busy for most of the day but his stress level on an all-time high, a bewildering contrast to the warmth that floods him every time he comes home and feels Dazai's body wrap tight ly around him, or catches him sleeping with his arms stretched out on the pillow above his head — even if, not too long ago, he said he was deathly terrified of someone tickling him.

Ueda only gets in touch with him after a week or so, bearing proof that Maria Dostoevskaya, Fyodor's mother, met with the old boss of the port mafia several times throughout six years, spending dinners, hotel suits, and trips to neighboring countries together. There's a photo too — of the three of them. The old boss, Maria Dostoevskaya, and a smiling, little boy that must be Fyodor — the striking resemblance to his mother especially clear in that picture.

It's almost laughable that the whole time the thing Chuuya was chasing after was the ghost of an *affair* that must have ended in tragedy. It doesn't satisfy that feeling of unrest bubbling in his veins, and it certainly doesn't give the mafia any ammunition in the form of Dostoevsky. If anything, the Russian is more likely to seek revenge if he found out that Mori even had an inkling to do with the death of his mother.

That entire week feels like the static air before the lightning strikes, loaded with electricity that is about to go off at any moment, and the only thing keeping Chuuya from getting burned is the thought that at the end of it, he, at least, gets to spend an entire night with Dazai alone soon, just the two of them, and escape from this hectic rhythm that his life has been lately.

The thing about *feelings* is that they're there for a reason. Eventually, the long-anticipated storm comes in the form of a phone call at five in the morning.

"Montogomery's gone."

It's Akutagawa, and for once, Chuuya can hear his usually flat voice ebb with something that could only be described as *dread,* which is more reason to worry than the statement itself.

"How the f—" Sitting up, Chuuya rubs at his eyes. "She was under constant surveillance. Who fucked up?"

"Chuuya-san, there's more."

"Oh, really? *What?"*

“Yumeno… they’re gone too.” And this time, Akutagawa is whispering. “She must have let them out.”

Chuuya’s eyes squeeze shut. This isn’t good. This isn’t good *at all.*

“Stay put. Atsushi too,” is all he can say right now. “I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

As soon as he hangs up, he hears Dazai roll over and reach out with one hand to touch his knee. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Chuuya says, not bothering to hide the way his fists clench. “Shit is hitting the fan.”

Dazai yawns before asking, “Can I help?”

He’s been going through cases with Chuuya more and more often, lying on the couch and puzzling over files as Chuuya stress-eats next to him. This is different, though. Yumeno might be a kid, but in the wrong hands, they’re a damn *nuke.* And Yokohama is their playground.

“Not this time, baby.” Chuuya gives him a kiss, sweet and chaste, then slides out of bed, switches on the lamp on his nightstand, and starts looking for clean clothes. “Do me a favor and wake up Oda. Stay in his room or drag him here, I don’t care. Just stay by his side until I come back. *Don’t* leave.”

“Chuuya wants me to share the bed with Odasaku? It’s that serious?”

Between slipping into his pants and throwing on a shirt, Chuuya nods. “Yeah, it’s that serious.”

Maybe it’s the words, perhaps just the tone, but Dazai spares him more teasing remarks and watches him get dressed in silence.

Once Chuuya’s done, his chest falls a little with how… absent he’s been lately, always on edge and probably a pain in the ass even though this thing between them is barely a seed in the soil. It’s with an almost-painful urgency that he goes back to the bed and strokes his fingers through Dazai’s tousled hair, lets his hands linger on his cheek. “I’m sorry. I’ve been kind of an ass.”

“You’ve been nothing but disgustingly sweet,” Dazai huffs, but he leans into his touch anyway. “Don’t make this any more cheesy than it has to be, or I’ll develop a lactose intolerance.”

Chuuya laughs and smiles into the kiss they share, pressing their foreheads together when they break away. “There’s an evil, powerful kid on the loose, and the guild probably has them, but I promise I’ll do my damn best to get back in time tonight to make our night happen.”

“You stay safe. You’re human, too, you know.”

Chuuya doesn’t know. Not really. But he’ll try anyway for both their sakes.

Chapter End Notes

you guys know what's coming right :3333

Chapter 12: Not a Traitor But Simply a Fool

Chapter Notes

a specific moment in this chapter was one of the scenes that i envisioned and planned to write from the very beginning and i'm super happy i finally got to do it! happy reading <3

content warnings:
- non-consensual drugging towards the end

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten hours later, and things have gone from moderately bad to the world is fucking ending — or, more precisely, the city is on fucking fire and under a curse, and all they've been doing is *twiddling their fucking thumbs.*

"So, uh, we're supposed to do what when we're up there?" Atsushi asks, fidgeting with the collar of his sweater. He's been slowly acclimating to the mafia, but honestly, Chuuya can't blame his hesitancy right now. This plan is not only insane but riddled with holes.

"We'll find Yumeno," Akutagawa murmurs next to him at the desk, "and kill him."

At that, Chuuya glances at Mori at the head of the table, his face placid. Killing Yumeno — it won't stop his ability. The thousands of people who are already affected by it won't stop unless — unless….

Chuuya exhales and looks at the other people gathered around the table. A powerful bunch. "We'll make sure to protect the citizen in the meantime," he says before giving Akutagawa and Atsushi a look. "Takedown as many guild members while you're on their ship. Run them into the ground."

"As Chuuya-kun says," Mori agrees, speaking up for the first time ever since most of the mafia's orders became clear. His hands fold together to cup his chin, and he smiles. "Now proceed to your tasks. We don't have much time to waste."

The room erupts into a flurry of movement and voices, calls being made, teams ordered to the headquarters and locations coordinated. Chuuya lingers, though. He's in charge of the operation on the ground,

so he has to ask.

When the room is silent and empty save for the two of them, Mori's eyes slide his way, glimmering with expectancy. A silent *go on, Chuuya-kun. Ask.*

"What about the influence of the curse?"

"Those lives are already lost." The serenity of his voice is like a soft, silent slap that shakes mountains. "You'll have to take care of them, Chuuya-kun."

Chuuya shakes his head. "We're talking about thousands of people. We can't just *kill* them all. It'll create chaos —"

"More people will die if we don't. You have to prioritize the lives of the living over the lives of people you cannot save anymore."

"That's bullshit. There has to be another way."

"That's *war."*

With a sharp exhale, Chuuya gets to his feet, his muscles aching with how hard he's clenching his jaw because he knows this isn't their only choice — his only choice.

Oh, there is another way.

Chuuya just doesn't like it.

He gives Mori a short bow of his head and murmurs a, "yes, boss" before turning around and walking out of the room.

Thousands of innocent lives, the future of their city, and the mafia over the potential risk of hazard to one single guy, and it's still harder than any choice Chuuya has ever had to make.

Chuuya's apartment is a fortress explicitly designed to keep abilities like Yumeno's away, not to mention that he called Dazai about a hundred times to make sure he's safe. Still, the sight of him eating cereal out of the bag in his pajamas makes Chuuya's chest sag with trembling relief.

When Dazai spots him, he makes a little noise in the back of his throat. "Chuuya, there are *zombies* in the city."

Walking over to wrap his arms around his boyfriend's neck and bury his nose in his hair, inhale the scent of strawberry shampoo, Chuuya laughs miserably. "They're not zombies. It's a freak-ability."

"A zombie-making ability? Hm, no, you are right. The people didn't look dead in the footage that I watched, but like they were under a spell. Entranced, I guess. I see why you were so stressed out earlier."

"It's this kid. Their ability is able to curse everyone who touches them with hallucinations so that they blindly attack everyone in near distance. Apparently, the fucking Americans have some sort of amplifier that lets the ability spread throughout the entire city.

" We were supposed to look after the kid. It's our fault."

Dazai hums and leans back against Chuuya's chest. "Sounds like quite a mess that you made there."

Chuuya opens his mouth to agree miserably but gets cut off by the hasty arrival of Yosano and Oda, dressed in matching all-black outfits of leather and steel.

"Good, you're back," the doctor says, "I need to ask you for a favor."

Chuuya frowns. "What is it?"

"I want to borrow Oda. And I know you'll freak because of —"

"It's fine."

Yosano pauses. Her eyes narrow with obvious doubt. "Wait, really? I prepared a whole ass PowerPoint to convince you."

"I'll need Dazai today anyway." Even though it would be safer with Oda, Chuuya will be there the entire time anyway, making sure Dazai will be safe — if he even agrees to lend a helpful hand, that is. Chuuya wouldn't blame him if he didn't.

Oda looks between the two of them, then mirrors Yosano's interrogative frown. They look like they've been working together for years now instead of the mere month the two of them have known each other. "What are you planning?"

"Yes, Chuuya," Dazai chimes in, tilting his head up to squint at him, "what *are* we planning?"

Chuuya jerks his chin towards the pair in the threshold, settling a

hand on Dazai's shoulder and squeezing it, saying a silent *later*. "You first."

"Dostoevsky business. We're pretty close to finding the people who want him dead but that requires a little…." She flicks her long nails, painted crimson-red, gracefully. "... danger."

"Good luck. Don't get killed or I'll haunt all of you for the rest of your damned miserable lives," Chuuya says with a huff.

Yosano, as always, replies with a brilliant smile before walking over and giving Chuuya a hug. "Thank you. For all of it."

"Don't speak like this is some sort of goodbye. It isn't."

"You must be going deaf, darling. This a *thank you*, not a *goodbye*."

Chuuya rolls his eyes and squeezes her shoulders in return. "Call me if you need anything."

"I'm sure you'll have your hands full with your own mess." Drawing away, Yosano raises her brows. "Do you ever plan to share with me anyway?"

"After I talk to Dazai."

"Right. Well, come here, kiddo." She's already all over Dazai before he can even reply, let alone argue. "Don't think you'll get out of this."

"You're so annoying," Dazai mutters, but he hugs her back anyway, and the striking contrast to the Dazai three months ago, who shuddered at the mere touch of hands, makes Chuuya bite his cheek to stop himself from grinning madly. "Cause trouble," he tells her, "and kick Fyodor's ass for me. And bring back Oda in one piece. He's still *my* bodyguard even if you —"

"That's all right, Dazai," Oda cuts in, poking his forehead. "Don't be a menace now."

"I'm just claiming my territory!"

There are more hugs, more teasing insults, and jokes shot back and forth. Chuuya should feel the pressure of time and the city on his back right now, but he doesn't let it in, not yet. Instead, he savors this short moment of normalcy and, for once, doesn't rush anything.

When Oda and Yosano leave, Chuuya has to swallow down the sudden

throb in his chest like an invisible knot ties around his throat and makes it hard to breathe even if, right now, there is still a chance to turn things around.

(In hindsight, maybe he knew. Maybe he sensed that it would be the last time the four of them would be gathered in his kitchen like that. Happy and weightless and dumb.)

It's Dazai who gets him out of his head and back to the present. "So, is Chuuya finally going to share his mysterious plans with me?"

"I want you to think about it first before you answer, okay? *Really* think about it."

Nodding, Dazai grabs another handful of cereal.

This damn boy is going to be the end of Chuuya.

"Even when we take the ability user out, the curse won't stop because it's this creepy doll thing doing the work, which means that the people will continue to be…"

"… zombies?" Dazai guesses.

"Pretty much, yeah."

Dazai shrugs and says, "okay."

"Hah?"

"Okay, I'll do it."

"I haven't even s—"

"Thousands of people are affected — everyone who comes in contact with trees and roots, I assume, so you either have to kill them, which is practically impossible in itself because of the sheer amount of people and how fast more and more people are getting affected by this; not to mention that it would result in political *chaos* and you, Chuuya, could be tried for genocide, or it's letting all these zombies kill even more people, and I think we both know what kind of effects that would have on Yokohama. There would be a war, and not just here. So yes. I can nullify the doll or whatever it is. A pretty simple solution for such an ugly disaster, actually."

A thousand rebuttals want to fight their way out of Chuuya's mouth but Dazai's wit would counter all of them in seconds. In the end, he's

right. There's a solution to this mess, a good one even, and Chuuya doubts he'd ever forgive himself if he let thousands of people die when he could have prevented it.

Explaining *how* the curse suddenly stopped will be a problem that Chuuya will just have to deal with later. Maybe he doesn't have to deal with it at all. If an ability suddenly stops working, especially when the user dies, then that's not Chuuya's matter to explain. There are still a hundred unsolved questions scientists work on about the phenomena of abilities.

Sometimes ignorance is bliss.

"Fine," he says with a sigh, "but we'll do it my way, okay? No wandering off because you're feeling goofy and no reckless expeditions, got it?"

Smiling, Dazai leans over to place a feather-light kiss on the corner of his mouth. "Yes, yes, Chuuya. I wouldn't want to delay our date later, right?

Right. Their date. And isn't that just the perfect incentive?

Naka ward has been hit hard, alarms blaring, people trampling all over each other as they try to run away from the ones under the curse's influence, running away from their *loved ones*, young soldiers dressed in black trying to keep both sides safe and untouched due to the orders they were given. It's frustrating to sit and watch it play out in the distance and do nothing in the relatively safe four walls of their own vehicle, but right now, protecting Dazai until they are able to nullify the curse is the top priority so Chuuya endures.

"So this is what you do every day?"

"Not every day," Chuuya mutters, keeping his eyes trained on the scene. "Maybe every few years when an organization is dumb enough to think they can take what's ours." Because he doesn't like the dangerous spark of interest in Dazai's eyes, he adds, "most of the time it's a shit ton of paperwork and obeying orders without question. Trust me, it's not as fun as it looks."

"Maybe we should run away then." It's clearly meant to be a joke, but as soon as the picture treads up in his mind, Chuuya can't get rid of it. A life without… the constant need to be on call. A life without lawless rules and everyday violence and mafia-black blood. A life in which

Chuuya can go out with Dazai without having to check whether someone's following them a hundred times. It's a good picture. It's also a pipe dream. "I've always wanted to see the beach."

"We'd spend the rest of our lives on the run."

"I know a thing or two about disappearing without a trace."

Chuuya wants to retort that the mafia does too, but the heavy breathing in his earpiece cuts his words short. "Nakahara-san, I — I got it! I got the doll!"

"Good, Atsushi-kun. That's good. You still on the ship?"

There's background noise, then more panting, "yes!"

"Akutagawa with you?"

"Uh, I don't see him right now — what if he's —"

"No, it's all right. You come down here and bring me the doll and let Akutagawa take care of the guild."

As soon as Chuuya had left Mori's office, he called Atsushi and told him that his orders had slightly changed. Whether he obeyed without a single question because he's still a rookie or because the blood running through his veins isn't tainted with mafia hierarchy yet, Chuuya doesn't know. Honestly, he doesn't care either. They're one step away from ending the curse. They're *so* close.

"Nakahara-san, how do I get down?!"

"You jump."

"But I — I'll die and —"

"You would but the tiger won't. Remember all the lessons on changing into the tiger? You can do it. I know you can."

"I'm not so sure…" Atsushi doesn't sound like he knows as his voice ebbs with hesitation.

Chuuya could help the weretiger out but there's no way he'll let Dazai alone on the field right now.

"Uhhh, I think they found me," Atsushi mutters helplessly. "It's now or never — now or never — now or —"

His voice cuts off, and then there's only the sound of *air* and wind and victory.

"Okay," Chuuya turns to Dazai, "ready?"

"All I have to do is touch a child doll," Dazai replies. "How hard can it be?"

He's right, of course. That doesn't stop Chuuya's heart from hammering as they get out of the car. His team of subordinates cleared the area in the immediate vicinity before, so there aren't too many people, but they must have a few gaps in their defense since two people turn to them as soon as they're out, their eyes empty with the curse running through him.

Chuuya disposes of them for now by letting the ground beneath their crumble, keeping them pinned. They'll have a broken bone or two thanks to him, but they'll live. That's the only mercy he can grant them at the moment.

"Atsushi," he says into his earpiece, "we're h—"

Atsushi all but slams to the ground in front of them — paws first, though, so that it cushions his fall. He still rubs his head with a pained frown as he slowly gets up. "That wasn't really fun...." He trails off because Dazai, dressed as a black shadow to keep a low profile, is already walking towards the doll. Chuuya watches with bated breath as he leans down and wraps his fingers around its neck.

A lightening-blue light spears the space where his skin touches the curse. For a beat, it's like time itself comes to a soft halt before the world, the city, lets out a breath and he lets it fall to the ground.

The noises around them still continue, but Chuuya knows that the curse is not to blame for it anymore. All those people — they don't have to die anymore.

Dazai did it.

"Well, that was anti-climatic," Dazai comments out loud and looks around with a disappointed scowl. "Where's the drama, the applause, the —"

Chuuya finds himself throwing his arms around Dazai's neck, smothering his sigh of relief in his shoulder as he murmurs, "thank you."

“Heh,” Dazai’s startled laugh fans against his cheek, “if I knew Chuuya would be so happy, I’d have done this way sooner ~”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chuuya pulls away to take a look around. He should take Dazai home anyway. Oda won’t be there, but now that this problem is dealt with, maybe they can have their night, after all. Perhaps they got lucky. Atsushi is glaring at his one giant paw when Chuuya jerks his head towards him. “Did you take ’em out up there?”

“Most of them weren’t even on the ship,” Atsushi says. “Last I saw Akutagawa was —”

“Their leader is gone,” a voice suddenly says, and Chuuya turns to see Akutagawa marching over to them, his coat torn in places and battered. Maybe Chuuya will use that as an excuse to get him a new one, one that doesn’t make him look like an edge lord. “They knew it was a trap.”

Atsushi’s brows jump together. “Then why would they even play along?”

Akutagawa’s gaze slide towards Dazai. “Probably because they didn’t know we had a nullifier.”

Before Chuuya can reply, one of his subordinate’s voices cuts through his earpiece. “Nakahara-san, we need your help.”

“What is it?”

“There are civilians trapped under a bus that crashed into a building. We’ve been trying to get them out for the last ten minutes but —”

“Just hang on, I’ll be there,” Chuuya mutters and then lets out a sigh. “Akutagawa-kun, would you mind keeping an eye on Dazai?”

“I just love your trust in me,” Dazai jokes, clutching his heart.

Chuuya rolls his eyes.

Akutagawa nods.

“Atsushi, you’re with me,” Chuuya says and only gives Dazai’s hip a soft squeeze before leaving to help out his team.

It will only take five minutes anyway.

It ends up being a twenty-minute show because there are mountains of rubble and debris and people thanking him so profusely that they refuse to let him go. Funny how different they'd act around him if they knew that he actually belongs to the mafia, but compliments are hard to come by these days, and Chuuya's only human, taking what he can get.

It's a five-minute walk back to Dazai and Akutagawa's location, and Chuuya spends the time talking to Atsushi about his operation on the guild's ship. He only notices it — or rather the lack of it — when he finally looks up. His eyes search for two people. They're supposed to wait in the car but the car is empty. Maybe they waited outside — even if that would have been idiotic…

There is no one, though.

The entire area is oddly deserted.

Dazai and Akutagawa are nowhere to be seen.

Chuuya touches his earpiece. "Akutagawa, where are you? Come in. Right. Now."

The only reply is static noise. The channel shut down.

Ignoring the weight of Atsushi's concerned gaze on him, Chuuya fishes out his phone. His fingers tremble as he taps on the name before holding the device to his ear.

Nothing.

Absolutely fucking nothing.

Chuuya clenches his fists and closes his eyes. Deep breaths. This doesn't have to mean anything. Both his boyfriend and his mentee could be just huge idiots, safe and sound, just unable to hear the phone, or asked to help out elsewhere. God knows, half of the city is still on fire. That's the thing about conflicts between abilities — the aftermath's always the worst. Probably why the government tries to keep them so hard under control.

Still.

Chuuya switches the channel and tells his subordinates to keep an eye out for Akutagawa or anyone with bandages wrapped around their neck. Then he calls Oda, just in case, curses softly when that goes

straight to voice mail, too.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

He ends up squatting down in the middle of the street, crushing the earth under his feet as he goes and accidentally creating a small crater. Scrubbing his hands over his face, his thoughts rush through him like a monsoon. It was the guild. It must have been. They must have been watching the mafia, watching *Chuuya*, the entire time, and as soon as he was out of sight, they struck. Akutagawa had just come back from a fight. Maybe he was more worn down than Chuuya noticed. Maybe he was injured and too damn proud to tell anyone about it. Fuck, he's going to *kill* him.

Or maybe it was someone else. God knows, the mafia has thousands of enemies. Chuuya has them, too. Lots of them. He doesn't take much joy in violence and death anymore — when he uses his power, it's always laced with intent. But back when he had first been forced to join the mafia? Missions gone wrong were one of the few ways to let out steam. He liked showing off, liked being an asshole.

Maybe it's karma taking what's hers.

It's his fault that Dazai's taken. Always has been. He never should have allowed him inside his life, never should have —

Someone tugs on the fabric of his shoulder, and Chuuya dazedly opens his eyes to see Atsushi making a face above him. "Your phone, Nakahara-san. It's ringing."

"Oh."

And then he sees the caller ID, and his heart *gallops.*

Oh.

"Akutagawa," he snaps into the speaker as soon as he accepts the call, "where the hell are you?"

There's an odd silence on the other end. Then the sound of a shallow breath. "Chuuya-san, it's me."

"Yeah, I know it's you, and thank god. Where are you and why —"

"Do what you're told," Akutagawa's voice tells him, "and he won't get hurt."

And that's when Chuuya realizes he's had it wrong all along.

"Akutagawa." His voice is cold, barely reigning in his temper. "Tell me you didn't —"

"Chuuya-san, just *listen*, okay?!"

The desperation in it makes Chuuya bite back a threat. He clenches his teeth, draws blood with his own fingernails, and then lets out a breath. "Okay. I'm listening. So *speak*."

"Dazai is all right."

"Then let me hear him."

To his surprise, there is actually the sound of shifting and then —

"Chuuya!"

It makes him sag back to his knees. Dazai not only sounds all right but —- but fucking *excited*. Chuuya hates him. He hates himself for how much he loves someone so careless with his own life. "Dazai, what happened?"

"Well, Akutagawa-kun decided to take me on a little trip. To see —"

And that's already the end of it.

"Your boyfriend's really annoying, you know," Akutagawa mutters.

Chuuya's handclaps around the phone in a white-knuckled grip. "I'll kill you. When I see you, I'll fucking —"

"Save your threats. Dazai's fine, you heard him, and it's going to stay that way. The boss… he will see him now."

The boss.

Mori.

Chuuya's mouthparts but nothing comes out.

"The boss also wants to see you. Come to the headquarters. I'm sure… I'm sure everything will be fine."

As soon as the word *boss* falls, Chuuya knows this idiotic plan wasn't actually Akutagawa's idea, but his last words, how pathetically

genuine they sound, make it crystal clear that his only role in this game is a pawn that happened to be at the right place at the right time.

And Mori's the puppet master.

"You already there?" he asks quietly.

"A few minutes."

"Don't let Mori touch him. I don't care if you have to defy orders to do it, *don't*. You owe me, Akutagawa."

For a few moments, there is only silence and then a defeated, "okay."

And the line goes dead.

Chuuya's head buzzes as he gives Atsushi some vague instructions on the task of cleaning up the city before taking off. Not in the car or a motorcycle, just using his ability to avoid an accident and causing even more problems. He's not sure how much time passes, not sure whether people try to reach him. All he knows is his destination, and that's where his feet carry him.

The elevator ride to Mori's office feels like the longest two minutes of his entire life.

When the doors slide open, he takes one deep breath through his nose and lets it out again.

For now, the main priority is keeping Dazai safe and alive. That's it. Everything else is a matter for later.

Mori must have informed his guards about his arrival because he doesn't even need to identify himself for them to open the doors and let him in. The room's as dimly lit as always, giving Chuuya the phantom feeling of a headache in the back of his skull that he gets whenever he spends too much time here. Except that this time it's not the light that's the problem.

It's the picture of Dazai seated at Mori's table, a glass of untouched whiskey placed in front of him, Mori only a few chairs away from him — a few chairs too damn close. Both of them look up at his arrival, but Chuuya only has eyes for Dazai. He barely restrains himself from launching over there and going berserk.

Instead, he makes sure that Dazai's physically okay first, then he trains his gaze on his boss and the humorous smile on his face.

"What is this?" he asks.

"I could ask you the same, Chuuya-kun," Mori tells him. "How curious that you ran all your careful planning into the ground just to save a few civilian lives. Then again, your heart has always been your biggest weakness."

Chuuya blinks. Something is missing — a crucial part of the information that he clearly lacks to see the entire picture because right now, not a single word that came out of Mori's mouth makes sense.

Then Mori's brows lift ever so slightly, and he turns to Dazai. "Oh. He doesn't know?"

Dazai says nothing.

What the...

"Know *what?"* Chuuya snaps, taking another step forward.

"Well, that certainly changes things," Mori murmurs to himself. His gaze meets Chuuya's. "I suppose you are not a traitor then but simply a fool."

Chuuya's eyes dart between the two of them. "Dazai," he says this time, hoping to get a reaction, a single piece of honesty for once, "do you know him?"

"No," Dazai says softly. It sounds odd. So *detached*. Like he's talking to a stranger and not Chuuya.

More smiles. "I don't know Dazai, Chuuya-kun. I know his father. Or, rather, I *knew* him."

Chuuya pauses. Wheels in his head start to turn, connecting pieces that he didn't even know were linked together. It's a loud, dizzying process that sends the entire room spinning.

Not a traitor.

His father.

Dazai knowing Dostoevsky.

Maria Dostoevskaya and her relationship with the old boss.

And it *clicks.*

It must reflect on his face because Mori nods and confirms his realization with his following words.

“I am the man who killed your father, Dazai. Isn’t that right?”

Dazai lifts his head and gazes at him blankly. “Yes.”

Because Dazai’s father was the former boss of the port mafia.

Within the span of a few seconds, Chuuya’s entire conception of Dazai shatters into a thousand tiny pieces, flooding him with the towering and devastating realization that Mori was *right*. That Chuuya has been a fool this entire time.

Every coincidence that had brought them together was a fabricated lie.

Every word a move in an invisible chess game.

Every touch, every admission, every —

Chuuya half-stumbles over to the table, takes a seat, and fills a glass of wine before chugging it in one go. The alcohol goes straight to his head. It doesn’t make him feel any better.

“You really didn’t know,” Mori observes, then turns to Dazai. “I took care of all of your siblings during the coup, but you, Dazai. There was not a single trace of you even when your father was still alive and in his right senses.”

“Well,” Dazai’s voice is flat, “the old man didn’t have the heart to kill me himself, so he sent me away. I wasn’t up to my siblings’ standards.”

“And yet here you are.”

“Here I am,” Dazai echoes mockingly.

“I don’t suppose you’ve made all these arrangements to have a chitchat with me, have you?”

Chuuya watches Dazai consider the question with pursed lips. “That depends.”

“Oh?”

“I know enough to realize that I can’t take what you stole, nor do I want to. But I do feel like the least you could do is give me a position here with a generous salary to compensate for making me a poor orphaned student that has to live in a rat-infested dormitory with hundreds of other people.” Dazai gives Mori a moment to consider his words, then adds, “and before you think of getting rid of me: this one —” He jerks his chin towards Chuuya. “— wouldn’t allow it.”

It’s not the content that fazes Chuuya but the way Dazai delivers it: with an air of poise and indifference that only adds frost to the snow of this entire situation.

“You are a doctor,” Dazai carries on seamlessly. “You must like your things clean, so I’m proposing this fair deal to you to allow you to keep the affair spotless.”

If this was any other situation but this one, Chuuya would have enough space in his head to admire the way Dazai dominates the conversation with a giant like Mori. Right now, though, it just turns the blood in his veins to ice. Mori will agree. Of course, he will — getting his hands on a nullifier *and* the true heir of the port mafia in exchange for a job and some pennies? It’s killing two birds with one stone. But in the end, it will be Mori with a leash in his hand and Dazai with a collar around his neck, and the moment, Dazai dances out of line…

Chuuya knows the feeling all too well. He was in Dazai’s shoes seven years ago, standing in this office and taking a job that he thought he could use to eventually take down the big bad wolf by pretending to play along for the time being. And here he is years later. Still a subordinate. Still collared. A follower. A puppet. A dumb sheep just with that much more blood on his hands.

“That can be arranged,” Mori finally answers and wraps his fingers around his own glass of whiskey before raising it. “To our newest port mafia member: Dazai Osamu.”

There is a conversation, instructions, orders, questions, but Chuuya fades them all out in favor of clutching to his glass like a lifeline as he finds himself adrift in the bottomless ocean all around him. One man deeper than the other.

At some point, Mori sends them off. After all, Dazai should be *rested* for his first day of being a mafioso.

Chuuya doesn't speak on the ride down to the lobby, but he gestures Dazai to follow him as he leads them to the underground garage, one of his cars still there.

The moment they reach his destination, all the emotions in Chuuya seep out of him, leaving him exhausted and numb like a deflated balloon miserably floating above the ground. He leans against his car, sliding down until he's all but sitting on the dirty ground. He only looks up when he feels Dazai approach and squat down in front of him, tentatively reaching out to touch Chuuya's hands.

"I'm sorry you found out like this."

"You're *sorry*?"

Dazai looks him in the eye. "Yes, Chuuya. I am sorry."

"You're his son?"

"Yes."

"And you — you —" His hands curling into helpless fists. "So was it all a lie just to get *here*? To get to Mori*?"*

"No," Dazai squeezes him like that will make it better or convince him. It's too late, though. "I swear to you, that was never my intention."

Chuuya shakes his head, a bitter laugh spilling from his lips. "Right."

"I didn't even like my father, or even *know* him that much. Why would I go through all this trouble to seek vengeance for a man that I barely exchanged three words with in my entire life?"

"Why would you go through all this trouble at all?! What is it that you want — and don't tell me the bullshit you gave Mori! Rat-infested dormitory?! You don't even *live* there anymore! You live with *me! With me.*" Dazai has never cared much for wealth. Chuuya knows that! Or, at least, he thought he knew.

Dazai's lips part and close again. Slowly, he sits down. "I don't know."

"You don't know," Chuuya repeats coldly.

"That is the truth. I knew who you were before I broke into your apartment. I knew that you worked for the organization that once belonged to my father, and I knew what the current boss did to my

old man. But I wasn't looking for vengeance. Or answers. I was just…. looking for a reason to stay. For a distraction. Something. Anything. And I found it." He swallows. "With you."

"Seriously," Chuuya mutters, "you could at least come up with something else to —"

"You wanted the truth," Dazai snaps. "This is it. I'm not lying to you, Chuuya."

"Then why didn't you just tell me?!"

Dazai waves his hands towards him. "Because you would react exactly like — like *this."*

"Oh, yeah, so the natural conclusion is to fucking lie about it? About everything?"

"Isn't there anything you didn't want to talk about?"

Chuuya lets out an incredulous laugh. "Obviously, but not something of this caliber! Did you ever even stop for a minute to think about what kind of sign this gives off? Me, an executive, being in a relationship with the child of the former boss? That they'd think I'm a traitor or worse that *you* are planning something? Do you know what Mori could have done to you if —"

"But he didn't. Mori isn't stupid."

"Yeah, he didn't. He only figured everything out, and now you're a fucking member of the mafia." Chuuya's smile cuts through flesh and bones. "*Congratulations*. You satisfied now?"

Dazai doesn't look happy. He doesn't look much of anything, only lost and heavy and leaking blue ink.

"I have a plan," Dazai murmurs. "It requires some planning and pulling strings, but it will be worth it, Chuuya. Trust —"

"It's fine. I've got one, too," Chuuya cuts in. He never should have let Dazai step this far, never should have let any of this happen, but he did. Time cannot be undone. What Chuuya can do, though, is not let Dazai make the same mistake as he did once upon a time.

"I'm sorry," he finally says, making Dazai look up with surprise when their fingers interlace, fitting so perfectly together. "I shouldn't have

gotten so mad."

Dazai narrows his eyes. *Good boy*, Chuuya thinks to himself. *Never trust anyone so easily.* "You're not angry anymore?"

"I am. But now more than ever, we've got to stick together." Tugging at his hands, Chuuya murmurs, "come here."

Reluctantly Dazai slips into the embrace. The moment Chuuya's arms slide around him, he sighs though and melts against his chest.

"I really do have a plan," Dazai mumbles as Chuuya's hands drift up the length of his back. Dazai's cold nose nuzzles in the crook of his neck. "Just needs some time and refining."

"And I really am sorry," Chuuya whispers, breath ghosting over his ear, and holds Dazai tight as his fingers press into a specific point between his shoulder blades. Dazai makes a startled sound in the back of his throat before his body goes limp and boneless. "But this is the only way."

Chuuya doesn't stop to look at Dazai because looking at him would lead to *thinking,* and if he starts doing that, he might change his mind. Instead, he slides one arm under Dazai's knees, picks him up, and opens the car door.

Once Dazai's in the back seat, Chuuya makes two phone calls.

Then he waits.

Outside the car window, Akutagawa and Atsushi look like two complementing halves of one coin. Somewhere in the back of his head Chuuya is glad that they've been slowly getting friendlier. They'll need that.

Chuuya gets out of the car and meets them halfway.

"He threatened Gin," Akutagawa tells him in lieu of a greeting.

Chuuya shoves his hands into his pocket. "I don't care. What's done is done. But now you'll have to do something for me for a change. Do you have what I asked for?"

Akutagawa holds out his hand and reveals a bottle of pills inside it. Chuuya takes it.

“Is that it?”

“No. I need you to leave and make sure no one from the mafia will find Dazai and his bodyguard Oda. If they do, and they most likely will, you will kill anyone who gets in your way. Got it?”

Atsushi’s lashes flutter. “What?”

“You can’t be serious,” Akutagawa says.

“I am. Things are about to get ugly anyway. You might not want to be here for this.”

“Gin —”

“I’ll make sure Gin is well cared for.” Chuuya shoots Atsushi a dry look. “You never wanted to join anyway. Well, here’s your chance. Take it while you still can.”

“What happened?” Atsushi asks anyway.

“Oda will explain. Just… protect Dazai.”

When Akutagawa clenches his jaw stubbornly, Chuuya meets him with a frosty look. “You owe me.” Not only because of what Mori made him do but because it was Chuuya who picked him up from the gutters and gave him a better life than anyone else ever could have. Chuuya who trained him to control his temper and his ability. Chuuya who was patient when all Akutagawa wanted was to see blood.

And even though Chuuya doesn’t help people to collect favors, he isn’t above acting like that type of human being now, not when it’s about this.

Akutagawa finally gives in and nods. “So when do we leave?”

“Now.”

When Oda slides into the car’s passenger seat, his eyes immediately rake over Dazai before seizing Chuuya with a cold glare. “He won’t forgive you for this.”

“At least, he’ll be alive.”

“Chuuya, you’re making a mistake.”

“I am doing my best,” Chuuya snaps, fingers clenching around the steering wheel. “He’s the heir of the mafia. It’s either joining or being killed by the boss, and I won’t let that happen.” His voice breaks, but he forces himself to carry on. “What I’m about to do… I can’t have him here while it happens. Someone will *always* find out and try to use him as my weak spot, so I need you to go. As far away from Yokohama as possible. And I can never know where you go.” His eyes lift and meet Oda’s. “Can you do that?”

Oda doesn’t look too happy about it. Still, he says, “yes.”

“Good. That’s good.” Chuuya nods, vision blurring around the edges. “He’ll be knocked out for, at least, twelve hours. When he wakes up, tell him… tell him I don’t want him here. That the mafia is *my* territory and that I won’t let him take it from me.”

“Chuuya…”

“*Tell him!*” Chuuya insists, the broken thing of a voice teetering on the edge of mindless desperation. “I need him to hate me so much that he won’t even *want* to come back.”

Oda shakes his head in silent disagreement, a loose breath slipping out.

“Okay, now get out of here before anyone sees you.” Wiping at his eyes, Chuuya grabs the door handle. “Meet Akutagawa and Atsushi at the address I sent to your phone. Take them and then go. Quickly. I’ll make sure no one follows you.”

“Chuuya.”

“What?”

“For how long are you planning to keep him away?”

He never thought about how long it takes to kill the boss of the port mafia before, so he truly has no idea. Maybe weeks. Months. *Years*?

Chuuya swallows down his feelings and exhales a shaky breath. “For as long as I need to.”

His apartment, when he enters it, is eerily silent. Empty. Cold even though the heating is running.

Every step forward drags at his bones, and Chuuya just ends up

collapsing on a chair in the kitchen, wishing that he wouldn't need to touch the bottle of wine on the counter to get it on the table. How bothersome. The palm lying on his table glows red with the activation of *for the tainted sorrow,* and a moment later, the glass under his skin shatters into a thousand tiny shards, a thousand tiny broken promises.

It's a mess. Horrible. Some of it ends up cutting Chuuya when it ricochets off the floor, but he doesn't feel the physical pain, not really, not with the heavy coat of dazed agony blanketing his entire body.

He's not sure how long he sits there, thinking about nothing until he hears the achingly familiar sound of his door being opened and closed. For a moment, Chuuya forgets about the last twenty-four hours and expects to see Dazai waltz into his kitchen, wrap his gangly arms around him and demand a kiss. The click-clack of heels pulverizes the silly illusion into walking smoke, though, smelling like the blood of the living, gun powder, and jasmine.

Yosano's face is streaked with small streaks of blood, her perfect hair a bit less than perfect when she comes to a stop in the threshold. She doesn't ask any questions, doesn't complain about the glass all over the kitchen floor, doesn't tell him to get it together. All she does is lean against the door and let out a sigh.

"Did Oda tell you?"

She nods.

"You can go with them," Chuuya says with a hoarse voice, not sure what exactly he tore apart between her and Oda when he sent them away.

"Dostoevsky knows who wants him dead."

Chuuya glances up at her.

"It's your boss."

Huh.

"So even though a vacation sounds nice, I've got a promise to keep and work to do," Yosano says, walking over to the counter and getting out two glasses before filling them with wine. "And, frankly, I think you will need me, too."

Chuuya would argue —

But she’s not exactly wrong.

He pretty much sent everyone loyal to him away. There’s still Kouyou, and Gin, and teams of subordinates, but between Chuuya and Mori, it will not be an easy choice to make. For any of them.

Chuuya accepts the glass Yosano gives him and takes a slow sip. “Does Dostoevsky plan a counter-attack?”

Humming, Yosano leans against the stove. “He sure does.”

How does the saying go…?

“The enemy of my enemy...” Chuuya murmurs

“... is your friend,” Yosano finishes for him.

And so, over a bottle of Merlot, two old friends make plans to take down the man at the top of an impenetrable tower, while somewhere, hundreds of kilometers away, a car heads towards an unknown destination.

Chapter End Notes

welp angsty angst arc is here. let's all hold hands and kiss about it

Chapter 13: Dear Person I Hate Most In The World (Pt. I)

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Sorry for the late update but it took me a while to get started on it and I've been pretty busy. The plan was to post one complete Dazai POV chapter, then one Chuuya POV one, but they're quite long so I'm splitting Dazai's into two. (That's why the chapter count got updated once again lmao.) At least, you won't have to wait long for an update, though, since it's basically all written and just needs some polishing!

Content warnings:
- mention and description of self-harm and violence
- mention of suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dear Person I hate most in the world,

I hope you are dead in a ditch somewhere.

I hope you are alive in a ditch somewhere, eternally tormented by guilt and sorrow for what you have done.

No, really… I hate you but if you are dead, I will hate you even more, so do this one thing for me and be still alive so that I can someday tell you all these things myself instead of writing letters. Because it's been almost nine months. That's a pretty long time to be mad at someone, Chuuya.

Anyways, yesterday we went to the village's center, which is less of a center and more of a square with a few vendors and stalls, for the watermelon tasting. I am not sure why but everyone there is obsessed with me. Every time we go out, all those old people want to hug me and pinch my cheeks. And you know what the craziest part is? I let them. I think if you were here, you would be proud of me. However, since you are not and since you probably never will even read any of this, I will let you in on a little secret. I think I'm proud of myself, too. Don't get me wrong… I don't think receiving a hug from an 85-year-old grandma who is lonely is the be-all and end-all of the universe, and if it was, I would not go out of my way to conform to it, but I guess it's nice to know that I can now. If I want to, then I can.

Whatever. I ended up tasting so many watermelons that I got a stomach ache. So I spent the rest of the evening on the couch in the house. One of the cats kept me company and even laid on my belly. I am still trying to decide whether I believe in that myth that says cats can feel when you're sick, but I'll tell you what: it sure —

A gnarled, wet tongue slobbering over his cheek bursts the bubble of epic prose Dazai has submerged himself in and yanks him back into the reality of dung flies, manure, and the jet-black *cow* lazily trying to murder him by ingesting his face!

"Get off me, you wanna-be-murderer," Dazai mutters, trying to get the cattle's big, square snout as far away from him as possible. "Can't you see I'm busy*?"*

Belinda — that's her name — pretends to obey for a few moments, though as soon as Dazai gets his hand back on his notebook, she's already back in his business, chewing on the grass on the other side of the fence that he's perched against like she doesn't have more than enough on her own side.

"You're not only a cold-blooded killer but a busy-body… and you're greedy."

"*Moo.*"

"Yeah, didn't think so."

Despite her glaring presence, Dazai doesn't attempt to shoo her away anymore. This cow might be the only living creature on this planet that actually likes him enough to follow him everywhere instead of, you know, sending him thousands of kilometers away like the other beings in his life have a habit of doing. He might as well take what he can get and accept that his fate seems to be to spend the rest of his life with this cow.

Still, the trance of the furious but fluid writing has been broken: every time Dazai's fingers tighten around the stolen pen in his hand, readying themselves to get out another word, something in his brain fails. Neurons collapse. The transmitters fry themselves. Nebulas implode and turn his thoughts into frivolous, half-jerks that his hands make every now and then. The only thing that he does is stare at the ink on the page and watch his words bleed.

With a puff, Dazai snaps the notebook shut and lifts an idle hand to scratch Belinda's neck. "Don't you think it's a paradox? To have so

much to say yet get out so little?"

His only reply is the soggy sound of chewing. It's very insightful.

"To think that even after so many months, it still…"

It still makes his throat constrict like it is currently doing so now.

"Stupid, heartless, idiotic, dumb piece of — ouw! What are you doing? He deserves it?" Belinda seems to think otherwise, judging by the way she is tugging at him in her attempt to eat his hair — apparently, Belinda is a stone-cold *traitor*. "Stop i — leave my hair alone! I grew it myself!" Having had quite enough, Dazai manages to wrestle himself out of the beast's mouth and jump a few feet back, still close enough to shoot her a warning glare and a raised index finger. "Do not look me at like that. You only have yourself to thank for this."

Belinda's answer is to simply continue chewing grass.

Dazai shakes his head before he picks up his notebook and pen. "Goodbye, Belinda," he tells the cow with a wave. Usually, he would pat her head, but she seems to have turned into a carnivore overnight. Death by being eaten sounds rather painful, so Dazai is unwilling to try this one out, thank you very much.

Gingerly he makes his way past the pasture and Belinda's not-friends — she is the local underdog here — until he reaches the coop where the chicken are wandering around and pecking at bugs in the dirt, then he weaves through the neatly tended rows of vegetable crops, past a rusty, ugly back-hoe and finally arrives at the porch of their house. The door is pretty much always open, so Dazai doesn't bother announcing himself. It's six o'clock, so everyone should be busy in the kitchen anyway.

Except that the house is quiet save for the creaking floor under his feet and the clock on the wall as Dazai pads down the hallway and sticks his head into the kitchen — that he finds empty.

How odd.

"Dazai."

He spins around, and Odasaku is approaching him, fingers fidgeting with the collar of his shirt. It's a nice one, black-and-white and pinstriped. But it's also strange, considering he has been wearing overalls and stained flannels for as long as they have been here.

“Odasaku,” Dazai greets him, grabbing one of the apples from the fruit basket on the counter. “What's going on? Where is everyone?”

Oda sighs, scratches the slope of his eyebrow like he isn’t sure how to say whatever it is that is on his tongue. “We received a message.”

“A message,” Dazai repeats with a question mark at the end.

“It’s from him.” Oda meets his eyes. “Time to go back.”

The apple in Dazai’s hand slips out of his fingers and falls to the floor.

NINE MONTHS AGO:

The first thing that Dazai notices when he comes to is the strange bumping sensation around him. Like his surroundings are moving. Up and down. Up and down. Like a carousel. The second is that his mouth is cotton-dry, tasting awful.

And the third…

Well, that’s the faint memory of Chuuya whispering, “*I’m sorry too,”* and doing something weird to his back before a wall of darkness and silence slammed into him.

Dazai’s head jerks up, a groan leaving him because of the stiffness and mild pain that immediately shoots through him. He blinks through the crust in his eyes and finds himself in the backseat of a car. In a *moving* car. And driving is —

“Oda,” he croaks out and rubs the heel of his palm over his forehead. “What happened? Where are we going?”

He catches Oda’s hands gripping the steering wheel before he answers. “What do you remember?”

Dazai glances out of the car as he browses through his foggy memories. “I was at port mafia’s base.” Dawn is slowly breaking over the dark-blue sky all around them. The road — the entire scenery is deserted. He hasn’t seen so much empty space since he left for college. “We went to the garage. I talked to Chuuya, and then something weird happened.” Something weird is happening right now. “Where is Chuuya?”

A few beats of silence pass.

“Chuuya’s still in Yokohama,” Oda eventually says.

“And we are….?”

“We are leaving.”

Dazai’s brows knit in confusion. “Pardon me?”

Oda lets out a strained breath. “Please don’t freak ot. Chuuya sent us away. He doesn’t want… us there anymore, but he gave us the chance to escape, so that’s what we’re doing.”

Dazai shakes his head. “You’re not making any sense, Oda. Are you feeling all right? Did Dostoevsky do something to your head?”

“Dazai…”

“Well, if nothing is wrong, then can you — can you stop joking around and —” Dazai twists his body to turn back because right there behind them, he will see the city, the towers, Yokohama, anything, but… there is nothing. Only a lonely road leading from nowhere to nowhere. “-- and *stop* driving. Why are you driving?!”

“I’ll explain everything, okay? Just listen to me. He —”

“I’m serious, Oda. Stop the car.”

“Dazai —”

“STOP IT!” Dazai’s hands fly to the closest door handle, but it’s locked. The car is *locked.* There is no way out. No way back. To *him.* “Oda,” it slips out of him with shaky laughter, “let me out, will you?”

His heart beats a hundred kilometers per minute. However, the car indeed comes to a slow halt at the side of the road. Oda is riddled with tension as he turns around to him, his expression heavy. “Yokohama is about to turn into a blood bath. It’s not safe.”

“I joined the mafia,” Dazai blurts out. “Did Chuuya tell you that? Did he tell you that it technically belongs to me, too?”

Oda gives him a small nod.

“I just joined the mafia,” Dazai repeats. “I can’t just leave. Mori won’t allow it.”

“Mori will have much bigger fish to fry than you being absent. Chuuya

wants to take him out."

Dazai's smile cuts into his skin. "That's crazy. He would have —"

He would have told Dazai…

It's *Chuuya.*

Unless…

Unless.

"He would have told me... "

"He didn't want you to know."

"Is he still mad? Is that it?"

Oda says nothing.

"I have a plan. I know how to get Chuuya out of the mafia. How to make everything better."

Still, Oda says nothing.

"He is really mad, isn't he?"

Why isn't Oda saying anything?

Dazai sniffs loudly. "He really told us to leave?"

"Yes."

"And where are we supposed to go?"

"Somewhere far away."

"For how long?"

"For a while, Dazai."

They stop at a gas station a few hours later. Since Dazai has sunk himself into a catatonic state ever since he woke up, Oda is probably relieved when he asks to go to the bathroom. What Oda doesn't know is that Dazai doesn't need to pee. Or eat those over-priced snicker bars. Or slowly thaw and pretend like everything is normal.

Dazai needs one single chance to explain everything. Then they don't have to leave like this, and Chuuya doesn't need to kill Mori, and everything can go back to its place.

So he runs.

The moment Oda disappears inside the gas station, Dazai takes off at the speed of light in the direction that they came from. They're in the countryside, so there is still no traffic even though the sun is already basking overhead in all its glory. That's the hard part. Finding anyone at all to take him to a more populated area. Hitchhiking back to Yokohama from there will be child's play. So he just has to run far enough until he sees someone coming.

It's approximately after fifteen miserable minutes of doing so that Dazai's whole body suddenly fills with regret. *He should have listened to Chuuya and work on his stamina while he still had the chance.*

Then again, he should have done a lot of things differently in hindsight. But what's the point in remorse when all it does is suck you dry? Exactly. There is no point. It's as fruitless as a stick of carrots.

Soon even Dazai's constant inner monologue starts to suffer under the strain on his lungs. The lack of oxygen not only slows his pace into a panting power-walk with hanging shoulders but also lets his thoughts evaporate into a fine mist that comes in the shape of physical agony. He's even dizzy enough not to recognize the dangerous sound of a car approaching. *From the wrong direction.*

He only snaps to alertness when he hears a door slam, then he turns his head to see Oda walking towards him with a grim face, and suddenly, it's like the unethical being above them fills up Dazai's life bar to make the game more entertaining. His muscles and his mind kick into gear at the same time as Oda increases his speed.

The game only lasts for a few frivolous moments, though. Unlike Dazai, Oda has spent the last months of his life loading up on protein, working out, and being a bodyguard. It's easy for him to catch up, and just like that, with his fingers curling in the back of Dazai's jacket, it's game over.

Then again, physical prowess is not all there is to victory.

"Odasaku, stop for just a minute and *think*." His voice comes out even more silky than he assumed he could make it be. Oda continues dragging him back by his collar like a guilty cat. "Do you really want

to do this? Kidnap me and ship me out of Yokohama against my will? It's the year 2021, for god's sake. Why is everyone around here still acting like we're in the 60s?"

"I don't think what Chuuya did was right —"

"Then why are you following his orders?!"

"*Because*, Dazai! Somehow I have grown to like you as a friend, not just as the boy that I'm being paid to protect. And I know that the only thing that awaits you back there is either pain or death."

They reach the car, but when Oda tries to gently push him inside, Dazai struggles with all four of his limbs, refusing to fall into line. "I have survived my *father*, the last rightful boss of the port mafia. What gives all of you the right to think that I'm a damsel in distress who is constantly in need of saving, huh?"

Oda pauses to look at him, though he doesn't let go either. "Well, god knows you haven't been exactly trying not to get into these kinds of situations, Dazai."

It's the most snappish tone Dazai has ever heard him use, which must mean something. Mainly that it's time to give up and save his energy for another day. But how could he? It hurts.

Thinking about turning away and leaving hurts. More than the sharp edge of the razor blade he used to slide across his skin. More than the butt of a cigarette pressing against the inside of his thighs. More than the sting of his father's hand when he back-handed him for refusing to carry out his demands. And definitely more than getting left at the side of the road that would lead him to his grandparent's house. That was just changing one devil to a slightly lesser one.

This one, on the other hand…

"Please let me go back," Dazai asks softly. "I will make it all up. I will fix it again. Please, Oda. Just… please."

Oda lets out a heavy breath before he finally thrusts him into the car. "It's too late for that now."

How long is *a while?*

How long does it take to murder the head of the mafia?

How long does it take to murder everyone else that stands in your way?

How long does it take to forgive someone?

After a day, another car joins them at a motel and for a foolish moment, Dazai thinks Chuuya is going to step out and explain everything.

But the people that get out are Akutagawa and Atsushi.

More protection. More bodyguards. More ways to ensure that Dazai will not under any circumstances go back to Yokohama.

Dazai is unsure how long they have been on the road when they seem to have finally found a destination. Not a gas station. Not an eerie diner on the side of the street. Not a motel. But… a world of green, open, empty spaces, and a few houses.

Considering they have been traveling through the countryside for a while now, it's no surprise. Dazai cannot help but snort out a dry remark anyway. "A farm. Really?"

"I know a family here," Oda says, unbuckling his seat belt. "A long time ago, they told me I would always be welcome if I ever needed a place to stay. They're good people."

They always are.

Dazai's movements as he climbs out of the car and looks around himself like an ant in a jar are sluggish. Fighting is useless. Begging Oda to listen to him is pointless. Going back is futile. The only thing left is to let the current take him and hope it's powerful enough to kill him.

Behind them, another car pulls up, but Dazai doesn't have to watch the doors open and close to know it's the two other Mafiosi. Frankly, the sight of them makes him a little sick, so he is content to ignore them for as long as possible.

The sun is loud and unforgiving on the entire way; the only reprieve is that his three companions are the ones doing all the heavy-lifting while Dazai can just follow the trail, snap at insects and lean into the shadow that his thoughts provide.

True to Oda's words, the Miyazawa family of three, a husband and a wife and their thirteen-year-old son Kenji, receives them with faces full of smiles and boundless hospitality. The four of them get a cozy summer house that's usually reserved for people who either end up here to escape or who find themselves lost.

Dazai is not sure which of the two he is.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Then:

"Dazai, you have to come out and eat eventually."

The only thing Dazai does, however, is wrap the blanket tighter around himself. It creates a gentle warmth that is almost enough to break through the ice in his blood. Almost.

"Please. At least, talk to me."

"Let me break down the door," another muffled voice says.

"I can break down the door myself, Akutagawa. But we're guests here. We can't go around and destroy property."

"But what if he —"

"I heard the toilet flush an hour ago. He's fine. Just sulking."

One would think that drinking the bare minimum would leave his bladder alone for most of the day but *no.* That thing will not give Dazai more than a few hours of rest, at most. Then again, at least he won't have to deal with them breaking in here just because they're paranoid that he might do something to himself.

Right now, Dazai's too tired to even commit suicide.

He wants to fade into oblivion without having to do something about it. He wants to melt like a snowflake landing on an open palm. Like a flame blinking out of existence.

Dazai had never felt hunger before he met Chuuya.

Not that mouth-watering, stomach-flipping, mindless hunger that he sometimes reads about in books or sees in movies and animes. When

he eats, he does it for convenience and purpose only, because he doesn't want to starve. (That kind of death is not only slow but gruesome.)

What he does feel, though, is nausea and the irritating dizziness harassing him whenever he forgets about it for too long, which is why Dazai finds himself dragging his feet down the creaky stairs at who-knows-o'clock. His curtains have been shut ever since they arrived here, and the light outside is dim, but not quite gone, not quite spread out either, so it could be early in the morning or the beginning of a summer's eve.

With the blanket following Dazai like a king'scape, walking, especially descending the stairs, is quite the task, but somehow he succeeds in arriving at the bottom without breaking his spine in the process. That's where his luck ends because as soon as he lifts his eyes away from his neon-pink fuzzy socks and up, he meets Oda's ever-so-calm gaze. His bodyguard — although technically that position might not be accurate anymore considering there is no one here to protect him from — is standing in the kitchen, wearing a spotty brown apron, and carrying a spatula.

Dazai juts out his chin.

Oda looks like he wants to laugh even if his mouth only curves softly at the corners. "Hungry?"

The only time Dazai could have said yes to that question was when he was pinned down on the bed, staring up into a pair of bright blue eyes. But that particular meal and person are no longer on the menu.

"Yes," Dazai lies and sits down at the table. A book is lying on it, an old crime novel by the looks of it, so he picks it up and listlessly pages through it as Oda shuffles around behind him. Slowly the thick, heavy smell of curry starts wafting through the air. Dazai wrinkles his nose. It better not be spicy.

He only gets another look at Oda when he places a bowl in front of him, then takes the seat next to him with his own food — an entire mountain of it, actually. Of course, Oda needs it to kidnap and catch his poor clients.

After taking a bite, chewing for a long time, and finally swallowing it down, Dazai glances around the quiet house. "Where are the brats?"

"They're helping one of the neighbors with something."

Dazai shoves the curry back and forth. His biggest wish for his next life, if he reincarnates — and he hopes he doesn't — is to be born as one of those who don't need to eat because they have tubes that feed them. Or well, they have tubes, and that is why they cannot eat. Either way, Dazai greatly envies them.

"Her name's Emily," Oda adds, even though Dazai did not ask. "She has a really cute dog."

"I hate dogs."

"Maybe this one will change your mind."

"I guess we will never find out because I don't plan to ever leave this house."

Oda's shoulders sag ever so so slightly, but his face remains perfectly open and friendly. "Okay."

"You can't f—" His words come to a sputtering halt when he processes what Oda said. "Okay?"

"Okay," he repeats.

"That's it?"

"Do you want me to convince you otherwise?"

Dazai narrows his eyes.

"Dazai, you've gone through a lot in the last few weeks. It's okay to want to take a break. It's your choice."

Dazai's teeth clack together painfully as he hisses out a breath through them. "Oh, so suddenly it's my choice? Where was my choice when you and Chuuya *drugged* me, packed me into a car, and then drove me away? What about my choice when I wanted to go back, and you didn't let me?"

It makes Oda pause eating and push his bowl away as he rubs his forehead. "You are right. We took away your choice, and I am sorry for that."

Even though that's what Dazai wanted to get, what he clearly wanted to hear after everything he said, it doesn't make him feel the least bit better.

Perhaps because Oda is not the person he needed to hear say those words. Not really.

“Does that mean we can all go back?” Dazai asks instead of addressing the apology.

“Atsushi likes it here,” Oda tells him. “Akutagawa doesn’t, but I think it’s good for him. And I… I know it’s selfish to want this, Dazai, but I like it here. It’s peaceful. It’s sunny. It’s good.”

So… if Dazai was to leave, Oda would not stop him. Probably. He wouldn’t come with him either.

And if Chuuya doesn’t want him there, then where does that leave Dazai? Alone. Nowhere. Out of place. Aside from these people, Dazai has no one. They are all that he has, all he ever had, and he used to think that it was okay to be alone — he used to prefer it, actually.

Now the thought of being alone — completely alone — looms over him like a dark, frigid cloud.

I don’t want to be alone anymore.

Dazai’s not sure why his eyes feel so thick all of a sudden; why they sting like that.

“Don’t go,” he says quietly when it should be, *don’t let me go.*

Oda’s smile is somber for some reason. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Dazai looks at him. “But he did. He left.”

Something warm and wet slides over his cheek. Dazai looks at the ceiling to find the leak that must have let the rain in. There is none.

“I won’t. I’m here to stay.”

One might assume that certain realizations can have a cathartic function.

Those people are wrong.

Dazai decides he will not stand for it.

“Hey you, wake up.” Dazai shakes his arm. “Wakey, wakey!”

“Hah?” Akutagawa’s eyes flutter slowly, then he sees the guy crouching in front of his bed, and he jolts up. Irritation bursts out of him with a shocked noise when he probably tries to summon his ability and finds nothing. He shakes his head. “What are you doing here? It’s the middle of the night.”

“That’s where my creativity spikes,” Dazai replies before sitting down. He wiggles and squirms until Akutagawa pulls his long feet in, albeit with a cold, sleep-deprived scowl. “I need you to tell me about Chuuya’s weak spots.”

“About his what now?”

“His weakness. His kryptonite. You know, something that one could use you to hurt him.”

“You’re his boyfriend. Aren’t you supposed to know that?”

A) Boyfriends would not spend two weeks apart without talking a single word to each other. Unless they discussed it before. Which they did *not.* So they’re not boyfriends but… enemies now. Yes, that’s what Dazai decided a few hours ago as he was trying to fall asleep. It’s hard to let go when your mind wanders to that one person, no matter what you do. But that doesn’t mean Dazai has to think sadly or positively of the man in Yokohama.

No, he can use all that brainpower for something else.

And B)... ask the Dazai who broke into Chuuya’s apartment, and perhaps he could have come up with a few decent theories how to get to Chuuya. Somewhere along the way, though, Dazai stopped looking for things to exploit and started looking at things he liked like his face, his shiny, red lips, the intensity of his gaze, the weight of his hands…

Dazai stopped looking at Chuuya like an object to study. So now Dazai is all but empty-handed.

Akutagawa had been his subordinate for quite some time, however. He should know an useful thing or two.

“Talk unless you want me to tell Atsushi all about your little crush on him.”

Akutagawa’s eyes fall wide open. “What?! I don’t! Don’t talk nonsense!”

“I only say what I see,” Dazai shrugs. “Perhaps you are too blind to realize it, or perhaps you’re just a liar. Atsushi listens to what I say, though. So… tick-tock, Akutagawa.”

“I…” Akutagawa rubs his eyes. “I don’t know what you want me to say. Do you think if Chuuya had any weak spots, he would have become an executive so fast? Or that so many people would follow him?”

Dazai’s eyes narrow. For a moment, he is silent. “So many people, you say?”

A nod.

“So he’s quite popular at work, yes?”

“Well… yeah.”

It takes a few moments to click, but Dazai lets out a bitter laugh when it does. Now he isn’t sure how exactly the port mafia works nowadays, but from the information that he has gathered from his own experience and the last few months of listening to stories about it, then loyalty is the highest precept still. And when Chuuya ultimately takes a stand against Mori, bloodshed and chaos are impossible to avoid. No matter how many people adored him to pieces before, some of them will oppose him for betraying the boss. There will be opposition. There will be in-fighting. There will be people who will want the throne. But most of all, Chuuya’s dear followers will eventually turn against him, whether it’s because they don’t agree with his actions or whether it’s because his betrayal will have cost them a life, a co-worker, or even a friend.

Chuuya might and probably will come out on top, but he will be *alone.*

What thing could Dazai do that’s worse than this? Nothing.

“Dazai?” Akutagawa asks.

Dazai blinks. “Hm? Ah, thank you so much. You have been a great help.”

“But I didn’t even say anything?”

“Good job.” Dazai pats his leg, then gets to his feet and walks to the door, where he shoots the boy a look over his shoulder. “If you

remember another secret or even just an embarrassing story, do tell me, though. Good night ~!"

Dear Chuuya,

last night I was up, thinking about what sort of cold dessert I should serve you in exchange for what you did to me. Then I realize that you're already eating it. Every day. And hopefully, for the rest of your miserable life since I have decided to stop fighting my stay here and enjoy it instead. Actually, I'm planning to enjoy it so much that I will never leave again. So I hope you are comfortable sleeping in the bed that you made for yourself. I have a feeling you will have to do it alone.

See you never!

Yours,

Dazai

Dazai does eventually venture outside. Since his new life goal is to become a farmer, not a vampire, he cannot possibly spend his entire life inside. However, the first breath of fresh, warm morning air laced with an underlying smell of cow shit is followed by instant regret when he hears the terrifying sound of barking.

His head whips around just fast enough to see the crow-black dog running at him with a speed that would rival a Cheetah. Dazai darts away and tries to find shelter behind one of the gigantic, rusty machines standing around, except that the beast trying to have him for breakfast seems to think that this is a *game,* immediately following him with even more barking.

"I - I don't taste good," Dazai exclaims, stepping as far away as the wall behind him manages. "Really! I swear to you that you will find no enjoyment in biting me whatsoever!"

"Luna? Luna!"

That's not the dog — unless the world has changed drastically overnight and dogs are suddenly able to use the human tongue —

"My name is not Luna," Dazai mutters to himself. If he does have to end up going out like this, he would at least like to do it with his own name. (Preferably so Chuuya will find out and feel really, really bad

about it.)

However, that voice does not belong to the dog but someone else — probably its owner, judging by how the beast turns away from Dazai and runs towards the source of that voice with a wagging tail.

Dazai's chest is just about to sag in relief when a face appears in front of the machine, two wide eyes looking at him, and long, curly hair in a shade that tugs at his heart strings since it reminds him of other hair that is reddish. Somewhere in the back of his head, he remembers that Oda mentioned them once — Emily, dog, something something. "Um, are you — are you okay there?"

"I'm fine," Dazai says after clearing his throat. "Wonderful, actually. I'm just… enjoying the shade."

Emily blinks, then smiles like she knows exactly that Dazai is just trying to talk his way out of his embarrassing situation but like she is too polite to point it out. "I'm sorry for Luna. She just gets so excited whenever she meets new people."

As if the dog understands that there is talk of her, she barks again, although this time it's a softer *woof*.

"I get excited too," Dazai finds himself replying as he scratches the back of his neck. "I just tend to react a little differently."

"Well, she's on a leash now, so if you get tired of the shade, the coast is clear." Dazai sees them even take a few steps back, and he lets out a small sigh as he slowly squeezes out of the narrow, disgusting space and starts dusting off his overall as soon as he's out.

Apparently, Luna thinks that he came out for *her* since she instantly rushes towards him again. His savior once again is Emily and the leash in her hand, stopping whatever grotesque tragedy was about to happen. Arms wrapping around himself, Dazai still can't help but shrink back even as he watches Emily crouch down to have a serious conversation with her dog.

"You can't just run up to everyone and act like you've been best friends for ages," they scold Luna gently. "Some people don't want that, and that's okay. You understand, right? You're a good girl. Aren't you?"

Now that he has a better look at the beast — rather than just seeing a flash of black — Dazai can see her brown puppy eyes shooting Dazai

pleading looks ever so often as if trying to guilt him into feeling bad for not letting her maul him as she pleases. As far as dogs go, she seems to be splendid at emotional manipulation because *it works.* Dazai's mouth forms a thin line because of the twitch of guilt in his chest.

"I'm not a fan of manipulation," Dazai tells her with a raised index finger. "Not unless *I* am doing the manipulating."

Emily, still rubbing their little criminal friend's neck, laughs and shakes their head. "She thinks that everyone must love her. Don't you, Luna?" Their fingers boops Luna's black nose. "Isn't that, right?"

Seeing that Luna won't do more than stare at him pleadingly, Dazai feels a spark of courage shoot through him before he takes a few tentative steps forward and crouches down in front of the pair, albeit still with a healthy and safe distance between them. "The world *would* be much easier if everyone loved each other, but that's not how it works, Luna."

"Don't tell her," Emily murmurs, covering her ears. "She's too young for that sort of lesson yet."

"Oh, right. Right. I'm sorry." Dazai tries to look serious. "Some people just take a longer time to warm up to each other."

Luna seems to like that, tongue lolling out happily as she lies there on her back and lets Emily give her enough belly rubs for a lifetime.

"Anyway," Emily says after a while. "I hope she didn't give you too much of a fright. I let her walk around without a leash because Oda and the others were okay with it, but I'll make sure to keep her by my side when we're here."

"Fright? Who says I'm frightened?" Dazai lets out a few dramatic laughs and flops his hand this way and that. "I am not scared of dogs… I just thought she was a… a goat…" To prove his point, he even goes to pet Luna except that his fingers tremble quite obviously when they hover over the shiny black fur — even though all the dog does is pant happily. Quickly Dazai retreats his hand and relents. "Okay, yes, I would really appreciate it if you could make sure she stays with you when you're here."

"Got it!" The owner stretches out their hand. "I'm Emily, by the way! I'm staying in the house down the road."

“I know. I’m Dazai.” He accepts the hand and shakes it for quite a while, eyes drawn to Luna before he realizes that he should stop, sometimes soon preferably. He plasters a confident smile on his face before asking, “so, are you a farmer?” Maybe Emily can teach him a few things here and there.

“Oh, no. No, I’m not,” they say. “I’m a student. I just spend my semester breaks here.”

“So you’re only a part-time farmer?”

“I’m not sure if what I do counts as farming, but sure. I guess.”

Dazai squints. “So, what is it that you do?”

Emily’s eyes glimmer, mouth curving into a grin as she nods over her shoulder. “Why don’t I show you?”

Dazai ends up staring at a field full of animals — which in itself is nothing special, but there are just too many different ones for it to be considered livestock, and some of them are missing limbs or body parts.

“So it’s not a normal farm,” Dazai concludes out loud. “It’s an animal rescue farm?”

Petting the head of a donkey with only one eye, Emily nods. “I’m actually surprised you didn’t know. The Miyazawas are running this whole thing.”

Dazai scratches the back of his neck and chuckles. Considering they arrived here nearly two weeks ago, he should have known, yes, but he also spent all of that time trying to become one with the bed in his room and refusing to talk to anyone, let alone bother listening to what’s going on in the world outside. Since he cannot give this explanation without going too much into detail about everything..... “It was a surprise. My… silly, goofy friends wanted to surprise me. Then I got sick and spent all of that time in bed trying not to die from fever, so this is the first time I’m actually stepping outside. Crazy, huh?”

If Emily is able to tell that every word that just came out of his mouth is a lie, she does not let him on it. “I’m glad you feel better now. If you ever feel like helping out, we’re always in need of a hand here.”

Dazai wouldn’t say that this is what he imagined when he thought of

the farm, but there is something almost fateful about ending up working with rescued animals. Chuuya would have loved it, Dazai is sure.

Too bad he is not here.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so, so, so much for all the comments, kudos and bookmarks!!! I'm super grateful for every word!

Chapter 14: Dear Person I Hate Most In The World (Pt. II)

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter:
- suicidal ideation
- mentions of past suicide
- a kiss (that is not SKK)
- talk about gender (I know, not really a TW but who knows)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai makes several new friends in the following days. For someone who has gone to college for two and a half years without exchanging more than five words that did not relate to class with anyone, and for someone whose only 'friends' are the mafia executive he manipulated himself into staying with — were (whose friends *were),* the bodyguard that is technically being paid to spend time with Dazai, and the underground doctor that he had no choice but to become friends with because they lived under the same roof for more than a month, that's *a lot.*

Then again, only Emily and Kenji are humans. The rest of his new friends are animals. His most favorite one: Belinda, the cow.

Kenji, the only and youngest son of the Miyazawas, tells Dazai that Belinda spent the first fifteen years of her life living completely alone until someone found her. The Miyazawas brought her to live with them before she was sold to the slaughterhouse for a few dimes. Apparently, Belinda was so unused to living with other cows that they rejected her for a long time, so she spent a few years spending most of her time with the humans only until a baby calf whose mother died after giving birth to him arrived here and the two of them formed a special bond.

Dazai pointedly ignores the irritating voice, that not only narrates but gives its unasked opinion on every little thing that happens in his life, telling him that he only likes the cow because she reminds him of himself —

She does *not.*

Dazai just likes her eyes. They're like big, black, beautiful crystals.

Then there are the cats — a dozen of them. It's pretty much impossible to go anywhere without nearly stumbling over one of them, either curled up on the porch or on a toolbox, chasing mice, or running around with the bigger animals and acting like they're the boss. Once Dazai stops holing up in his room, Oda and the other two mafia underlings start leaving the door to their little house open more often and often, which means that Dazai finds his lap full of warm, purring cat butts more often than he can count.

Still, he prefers the cats over all the damn tail-waggers running around.

Emily keeps her promise of keeping Luna close by, but that little beast is one of the good ones — the worst she will do to you is fall on her back and look at you with puppy eyes until you cave in and rub her belly. Some of the other dogs, on the other hand, are a bit more aggressive about emotionally blackmailing physical love out of you, which is why, ironically enough, Dazai's stamina gets quite the work-out over the time, what with all the frantic running he does.

Since there isn't much to do without any internet connection, college duties, and boyfriends, Dazai really does end up spending most of his time helping out, feeding the animals, rubbing Belinda's chin until she dozes off in bliss, taking the ponies out for walks, or collecting eggs. He usually manages to skip any activity that involves cleaning poop, tricking Atsushi and Akutagawa into doing it.

Speaking of which…

"That's *wrong.* That's not how you do it."

"Of course, that's how it's done."

"Well, it's a shit way to do it."

"Says the orphan who never cooked a proper meal for himself until recently."

"And you were better off, hm?"

"I was an orphan for way less time than you, so yes, jinko. It is."

"It's not. Here, that's how…."

Snapping his notebook shut so loudly that it scares away the poor cat napping on the chair beside him, Dazai lifts his gaze to the dreadful

scene in front of him.

Atsushi and Akutagawa are on cooking duty tonight.

And they're *bickering*.

Which in itself is not unusual, the two of them are always going at it, but recently their stupid fighting has gained a new edge to it, creating irritating, bothersome, disgusting sexual tension wherever they go so that Dazai cannot even sit in peace and note down today's thoughts without being subjected to the sight of Atsushi crowding Akutagawa against the counter and 'showing him how to correctly chop zucchinis with two arms around him AS IF THERE ARE SO MANY DIFFERENT WAYS TO DO IT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

It makes Dazai *sick*.

Unfortunately, snapping his book shut is not enough to startle them out of their little bubble, the two of them continuing their passive-aggressive mating ritual without even acknowledging Dazai's presence in the kitchen. It gives him no other choice but to resort to more forceful means like walking over there and simply yanking the two of them apart.

Atsushi's eyes go wide as he looks at him. Akutagawa, on the other hand, glares at Dazai like he personally murdered his parents and kicked him out on the street.

"You're taking too long," Dazai announces coldly and grabs the free knife. His cooking skills are still lacking even after two months here, but he does know a thing or two about wielding a knife and cutting. When the blade falls down and chops the zucchini into tiny, little pieces, Dazai hopes that the two underlings both know that this is what's going to happen to their genitals if they so much as dare to kiss on the lips.

There will be no sex, no romance, and definitely no couples in this house or so help h—

"Dazai-san," Atsushi says, cutting off the stream of thoughts in his head. "... there is no more zucchini."

Dazai glances down at the cutting board. Indeed, no more vegetables are left. Oh.

"See how fast you get things done when you don't waste the entire

time talking?" he chirps. "You guys should try it sometimes!"

"We wouldn't have to if you ever bothered to help out in the kitchen," Akutagawa mutters with crossed arms.

Dazai raises his fingers and shushes him. "Nuh-uh. No talking, Dracula-kun. Just *working.*"

His only reply is another death glare, but hey, mission accomplished. Dazai doesn't have to listen to that god-awful flirting anymore for the rest of the time it takes to prepare dinner, the three of them working in silence. He doesn't stop there, though. This is only the tip of the iceberg.

Later, when they go out into the courtyard to eat after Oda comes back with Emily and Kenji from a trip to the local veterinarian, and everyone takes a seat around the table, Dazai swoops in and steals the chair Akutagawa was going to sit down on, offering him a bright, innocent smile in lieu of an apology. Atsushi sitting next to him looks like he wants to say something, but he plays it off with a laugh. Good boy. There's no use fighting against Dazai.

The next day, Dazai catches the two of them being a little too loud and a little too happy in the chicken cot. He so happens to accidentally smack an egg against Atsushi's overall, forcing him to leave and change. However, Akutagawa doesn't seem to think that it's an accident. As soon as Atsushi is out of the little house, he whirls around to Dazai, hands curled into big, brave fists.

"What the hell is your problem?"

"Me?" Dazai says, making his eyes go wide and oblivious. "I have not the slightest idea what you mean."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," Akutagawa growls.

"Hm, no. You will have to spell it out for me if you want to discuss something."

That is, of course, where things get complicated because spelling it out would be admitting that poor little Akutagawa has a crush. And getting an emotional brick wall like him to do it is not entirely impossible but improbable for sure.

Dazai pets his favorite chicken like there isn't currently a goth king looking at him like he's trying to strangle him, all too happy to either

wait or let the conversation end here.

“Are you that miserable that you don’t want anyone else to be happy either?”

Squatted down on the floor with a chicken on his lap, Dazai lifts an eyebrow. “As you can see, I’m doing perfectly fine, so once again, I have no idea what you’re getting at. You should try reading more books to work on your communication skills, you know.”

“Yes,” Akutagawa grunts, “I’m sure I would be happy too if Chuuya sent me to the other side of the country just so he wouldn’t have to deal with my sorry ass.”

That name.

“You’re here too, aren’t you?” Dazai points out. “I guess we were both useless to him.”

“I’m only here because I’m supposed to look after *you* —”

“Or because he saw you couldn’t even do such a simple job as looking after someone without immediately betraying him. *I* think it was much easier to send you away with me than taking care of such a useless subordinate.”

“You —!” Dazai only sees the tip of Akutagawa’s freak ability before it thunders towards him, aiming for his chest, except that as soon as it touches him, it disappears in a flash of blue light. It makes Dazai laugh loudly. It quickly gets cut off because Akutagawa throws himself at him. Dazai’s chicken flies away with a great deal of noise as he lands on the floor, Akutagawa with a shaking raised fist and a face that’s flushed above him, all his thoughts and emotions practically pouring out of him. “What’s your fucking problem?! What do you want?”

Nothing.

Dazai wants nothing anymore.

He learned his lesson, and he is not going to repeat it.

“Why can’t you just leave us alone?” Akutagawa exclaims ever so dramatically. “It’s not our fault that he left you!”

Dazai’s eyes flutter closed, chest sagging in disappointment. Oh, how

he wishes this grunt would just punch him already instead of saying all these things. What's the use of provoking someone when they won't even give you a good beating?

Before he can utter anything else, Dazai hears the shed open and then: "Ryuu, what are you doing!"

Eyes opening lazily, Dazai watches as Atsushi drags Akutagawa off him, his eyes darting furiously between the two of them. "I've been gone for, like, two minutes! What the hell happened?"

Akutagawa flicks his hands at Dazai before turning away from him. "Nothing."

"Forgive me for not believing it, but this doesn't look like nothing!"

"Just… let it go, Jinko. He is not worth it."

Dazai breathes out a soundless laugh to himself as Akutagawa storms out of the shed. Atsushi stays and helps Dazai get to his feet, wearing an overly concerned expression the entire time. "Are you sure you're okay, Dazai-san?"

"Oh, I'm splendid," Dazai replies with a wave of his hand. "I'm afraid the poor chicken got quite the shock, though."

"The chicken will live…"

Dazai nods, but he doesn't say anything because it's obvious from the tension radiating off Atsushi that he has something to say that he's currently gathering his courage for.

"Dazai-san…"

"Hm?"

"I can't know what you two fought about, but I can imagine because I'm not stupid. I realize that Akutagawa can be bit brash and reactive, but… you haven't been exactly easy on him either."

"Is that so?"

"Don't play stupid," Atsushi snaps. It's quite the tone if you compare him to the anxious mess he was when he joined the mafia. Dazai is not sure whether he's a fan of that character development, especially when he is at the end of it. "You know that he still feels guilty for what he had to do that day? That he thinks we wouldn't be here right

now if not for that one decision?"

It's not a surprise considering how he reacted when Dazai targeted that specific memory. Not a surprise, but it's still amusing since Dazai hasn't spent one second of his time blaming what happened on Akutagawa, of all people. Not only because avoiding meeting Mori was an unavoidable task from the very beginning but because Akutagawa was given a precarious choice between his mentor's boyfriend and his sibling. Every sane person would have chosen the latter over the former. Dazai is sure that *said mentor* doesn't blame him either.

"If Akutagawa is that foolish and that self-centered to believe that all of this is his fault, I can't help him either," Dazai replies with a shrug.

Atsushi's lips purse in wordless but loud disappointment. "Of course, you can. You just don't want to."

Dazai is not quick enough to reply before Atsushi is already walking away. Then again, Dazai doesn't have much to say on that topic either, so maybe it's for the best.

Later that evening, Oda finds him sitting on the porch after he skipped dinner, his only company the bottle of homemade strawberry wine that the mister Miyazawa gifted them a few days ago. He takes a seat next to Dazai and doesn't offer any wistful advice, simply watches the sun set far away in the west. As much as Dazai enjoys the silence, he doesn't like it when it's filled with unsaid words.

"Come on, Odasaku," he says, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. "Say what you want to say. Let's get it over with."

"What do you think I'm going to say?"

"Odaaaaa….."

Oda laughs. "Dazai, I'm neither your teacher nor your parent. If you want to talk about something, then I'm happy to do that, but I'm also happy to sit here with my friend and steal some of his wine if he lets me."

Rolling his eye, Dazai shoves the bottle against his chest. "You're so reasonable that it's not even fun to try to argue with you."

"I would apologize, but it took me too long to get to this point. It's nice."

No, Dazai doesn't want him to apologize either. Or change. Odasaku is just fine the way he is. However, that means that Dazai actually feels the maddening urge to *talk*. About things. Feelings. Epic epiphanies.

"He won't ever ask me to come back, will he?" His voice is muffled because he's face-planting his bony knees, but it's better this way. Every syllable that comes out of him is laced with pathetic vulnerability and the desperate desire to hear Oda contradict him.

"You don't know that."

"It's been two months without a single word."

Oda told him that Chuuya would not know where they're going, so that makes sense, yeah, but Dazai is pretty sure Chuuya has a way of contacting Akutagawa. If he would want to get them, that is. Right now, Dazai doubts that.

The moment he heard that Chuuya sent him away because he didn't want Dazai there anymore because of the little secret he had been keeping about his background, Dazai called the bluff. This vacation was clearly to keep Dazai as far away from the mafia as possible, just like Chuuya always said he would.

But now… after such a long time, Dazai is starting to question whether he was the fool for believing otherwise. If Chuuya only wanted to protect him, why would he wait so long? Why wouldn't he get him? Why isn't he here right now?

Dazai went through every scenario in his head, and none of them included the murder of Mori to take this long. So it's not *that*.

It's something else.

"We don't know what's happening in Yokohama right now," Oda retorts. "I can imagine that they made quite a mess over there."

Right.

It's not only that Chuuya that hasn't shown face. Yosano hasn't tried to reach out either, which makes sense if they work together. Still.

The four of them used to live together, have dinners and movie nights. Now they're split in half.

"I hate him," Dazai murmurs, shaking his head. "So much."

First, there was that feeling of betrayal, then sadness before it ebbed into fever-hot anger, but you can only keep a fire alive for so long before it eventually dies out and leaves you freezing.

Two months and all that's left of the fire is a small hole in his chest, and Dazai hates Chuuya for that.

Worst of all, though, is how much he actually misses him while not even knowing whether he will even be able to tell Chuuya that he hates him in person.

A big, warm hand rubs his back, and it gives Dazai just enough strength to move the muscles in his arm to reach for the bottle and take a few sips before wiping his mouth.

It takes him another few minutes to lift his head again, let alone speak.

"What about Yosano?"

The light in Oda's eyes flickers before he smiles gently.

"Surely you miss her?" Dazai coaxes because this is so much easier than the other topic. "Don't tell me that spark we saw was imaginary." He only realizes that he said *we* after his mouth falls shut, and it's too late. How stupid.

"I do, yeah," Oda says then. "But right now, we're simply on two different paths."

Snorting out a dry, bitter noise, Dazai raises the bottle to his mouth to take another sip. "How open you are, Odasaku. Except that you're here, and she's probably with Dostoevsky, who is trampling all over your so-called road."

Oda shrugs. "I don't mind sharing."

Oh.

Oh?

"Dostoevsky is a greedy, little rat," Dazai feels the need to say as Oda's friend. Back then, every toy that Dazai played with eventually got stolen by Dostoevsky. Truly insufferable, that guy. "I wouldn't count on him to share."

Lying down and bracing one arm under his neck, Oda lets out a quiet

laugh. “I think he has grown up.”

Okay, seriously?

“Just what the hell did the three of you guys do on that day?” Dazai shuffles over to stare the man down, not giving him the chance to look away mysteriously and get out of it with another nervous laugh. “I thought you were fighting for your lives, not having an orgy!”

“We didn’t have an orgy, Dazai,” Oda replies with his mouth curved into an amused smile. “But we had dinner before we got down to business. And perhaps a few drinks. All I’m saying is that Dostoevsky seemed okay.”

Dazai only scowls in reply before leaning back with his hands braced on the floor and head hanging back as well. A loud, dramatic sigh leaves his throat.

All this talk is making him think things he shouldn’t think. And all this *wine* is making him feel warm and mushy and —

And a little needy.

Not for a deep conversation with his friend — although he does appreciate that. Not for a tight hug or an innocent kiss on the forehead either, no. But for a hot tongue in his mouth and perhaps a hand around his dick.

Dazai sighs again. When he decided he would enjoy staying here out of spite, he did not take into account that he would eventually get horny and that his hand could only do so much for him after all the treacherously wonderful things *Chuuya* showed him.

This is a disaster. A catastrophe. By far, the biggest tragedy that has come out of all of this.

“What are you sulking about?”

“... I wish Chuuya was here.”

“I thought you hated him?”

“I do but… at least, he gave me sex.”

He hears Oda chuckle. “Ask Akutagawa or Atsushi. They seem to be in the mood lately.”

Dazai makes a face. *Ew.* Then he shoots Oda a scowl, though. “What, so I should ask them, but not you? You are withholding the best goods from me, Odasaku.”

“I’m not sure how much I could give you, Dazai. I haven’t had any in a while.”

“So you and Yosano never actually fucked,” he observes. “I guess I lost that bet.”

“You made bets?”

“Of course, we did.” Again that *we,* even if this one is unavoidable. Impossible to make a bet with yourself, right? At least, improbable. “And I’m sure you could still work the equipment. It’s like riding a bike… or so I’ve heard.”

Oda huffs out another laugh. “The best I can offer you is some lazy making out. That’s it.”

Dazai perks up. “Really?” Kissing can be nice. He knows that kissing Chuuya was always nice, hot and slow and sensual and —

He really doesn’t want to think about that.

“I was trying to joke but…”

“But when you look at me, you will change your mind and want to provide your friend with some free serotonin?”

Bracing himself on his elbows, Oda considers the entire situation for a while before shrugging and muttering, “what the hell. Okay. Come here.”

Dazai crawls over like an excited child, sitting close next to Oda and watching him as he sits up, one hand lifting to cup the side of Dazai’s head. A single brow raises. “You really want this?”

“I really, really do,” Dazai agrees.

He is not sure when he became this shameless, this willing to talk about the things that used to make his mouth clamp shut in embarrassment. It’s probably just another side effect of spending so much time with Chuuya. But that is one of the things he is glad about because it means he gets to do this:

Close his eyes and wait, wait, wait, and then —

Warm but firm lips are pressing against him. Kissing Oda is different than kissing Chuuya. His stubble is rough against Dazai's skin, not the neatly-maintained softness he has grown accustomed to from Chuuya, and the way he moves — Dazai keeps expecting for a hand to tease him, slide under his shirt, make him shiver, but Oda's hold stays on his face the entire time. It's definitely not bad, not at all, just so different than a small part of Dazai yearns for the familiarity that Chuuya's body had become to him, yearns for the obscenely expensive cologne he wears and the nice shampoo he uses, yearns for Chuuya himself.

Still, it's nice. That fluttery, liquid pressure in Dazai's stomach mellows out a bit with the kiss, lets him focus on the present only: pull on Oda's bottom lip, stroke his fingers down the length of his muscular arm, breathe through his nose.

When they eventually break apart, Dazai's not sure how long it's been. Neither of them is wearing a watch. The light is still there outside, but somehow the world has taken on a golden, shimmery glow. It has become a little softer. A little less sharp around the edges.

Dazai hums to himself, trying to contain an embarrassingly goofy smile. "Thanks."

"Thank you yourself," Oda replies with a chuckle before he lies back down, a content smile on his own tugging on his lips. Dazai can't help but study it. During all that time they spent together back in Yokohama, he wouldn't go as far as saying that Oda was a particularly sad person. He liked good food. He flirted with Yosano and clearly enjoyed it. He teased his friends. He worked out. Despite all that, there was still something a little dark about him, a weight clinging to him that never left, no matter how carefree his smile was. But in these last few months… bit by bit, whatever burden Oda has been carrying with him is slowly whittling down.

He seems so much lighter.

Clearing his throat, Dazai pulls up his knees and rests his chin on them. He sighs. This time it's a content one. "You clearly pulled all the weight, Odasaku."

"I wouldn't say that. You're pretty skilled yourself."

Well.

Dazai had a good teacher.

The following day Dazai wakes up with a cotton-thick headache and the realization that something has to give.

Something.

Even if it's the space that Chuuya carved out for himself.

First, though, he begrudgingly accepts that he will have to do something about Akutagawa and Atsushi. Last night, Dazai and Oda ended up brining up that particular topit, after all, more than a little tipsy the both of them, and Dazai tried to argue that the idea bothers him so much because whatever bond they think they have only existed because they are forced to spend so much time together. After a few minutes and some of Oda's wordless looks, Dazai shut his mouth and gave up.

Young love is a parasite that Dazai has no medication for.

Since alcohol makes Dazai sleep even lighter than usual, it's still dark outside as he lies in bed, petting one of the cats, that snuck in here when he all but crawled up the stairs, and plotting. He only decides to get out half an hour before he knows the others in the house wake up, meaning Akutagawa and Atsushi, since Oda will have to sleep off his bender first.

Outside, he sets the table for two and even makes an effort to pluck a beautiful-looking flower and put it into a tall glass. Then, he hears the heavy steps of Atsushi dragging his feet into the bathroom. He turns on the stove and starts preparing breakfast.

There's this strange feeling in his stomach, his insides twisting this way and that as a hundred scenarios of epic failure shoot through his brain. He is tempted to leave everything standing as it is and flee the crime scene before anyone can catch him, but he forces his feet to stay rooted to the ground even as Atsushi comes trotting down the stairs.

"Dazai-san…? What are you doing?"

"Breakfast," he says, voice thick and soupy in his throat.

"Oh. Leave the stove on after —"

"For you. Uh, for you and your Dracula-kun."

"For *us?"*

Dazai hums. He's *not* going to repeat that.

"Why would you do that? You don't even make breakfast for yourself."

Dazai snorts dryly. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Atsushi-kun. Just accept it."

"It's not poisoned, is it?"

"*No,* it's *not.*"

When he turns around, Atsushi still looks unconvinced. That is when Akutagawa descends, his dark hair sticking up in all directions and eye bags so dark that one would think he hasn't slept in a week. Dazai has noticed that Akutagawa hates waking up early, but somehow, he still does it every morning with Atsushi. That's true dedication to the cause. True… romance, or whatever.

"What's going on?" Akutagawa mutters.

"Dazai-san is making us breakfast."

"First you behave like a lunatic, now you're trying to poison us?"

"That's what I said, too!"

"No such thing, you morons," Dazai mutters. "Is it that hard to believe that I'm doing something nice for you?!"

Atsushi doesn't have to say any actual words for the answer to come through.

Akutagawa says, "yes."

Dazai puffs out an insulted breath and turns back to the sizzling eggs. At least, *they* will not judge him for his past mistakes. "Sit down and eat what I give you. Just don't make me say it."

Don't make him say "I'm sorry" or anything cheesy like that.

(The last time he apologized, he ended up unconscious and drugged.)

Finally, that seems to get the message through. Akutagawa just walks out into the courtyard without saying another word or waiting for more than Dazai has already done here. However, Atsushi lingers long enough to offer Dazai a tentative, genuine smile and an

acknowledging nod before trotting after Akutagawa.

That's good enough.

For now, it's enough.

Dear Chuuya,

remember that letter when I told you that I hate you now? Now don't get me wrong. I still do. You enrage me. And I think you should take your own advice and go to therapy instead of behaving like a 20th-century male who thinks it's his sole right to decide what his wife (me, of course) can or cannot do with the excuse of 'protecting her.

But…

I think that even though I said I would stay here forever, a part of me kept hoping that eventually, I would get the chance to tell you that in person. Give you the letters. See the expression on your face when I hurt you the same way you hurt me. I really hoped that I would at least get to see you again one day, and now I'm starting to realize that I might have been wrong.

And between you and me, it kind of sucks. I keep thinking it's okay, that this dreadful existence is somewhat bearable, but at the end of the day, I crawl into bed, and I realize that I'm still hoping to magically find you there. Even if only so I can finally reject you.

The bed is always empty, though, and every day feels unfilled somehow.

Not that I'm not used to that already. I am. But it kind of stings more than any of the various mental disorders ever did, and you know how much I don't like pain.

So consider this me letting you go.

I am letting you go.

Hey Chuuya,

guess what? I lied. Well, not entirely. But I might have overestimated my own abilities here. You see, I thought that if I find peace with myself and write the words and then let them rest, that uncomfortable feeling inside my chest will finally stop bothering me but apparently, it's not that easy, which is quite frankly rude because no one ever told me it would be this

hard to move on. You should have told me that before you let me into your stupid home, cooked me your stupid meals, let me sleep in your stupid bed and made me have all these stupid feelings.

Then again, I guess I should have told you a lot of things, too.

Anyways. I am learning that letting go doesn't happen overnight but that it's a looong, tedious process that you have to put work in every day?! Can you believe this? I hate it. But Oda has been telling me things, things that he did after — well, I'm not going to go into details of his past because he told me those in confidence but, let's just say, after some… things that take a lot of time to deal with — and even though I seriously doubt that they will work on someone like me, I still find myself following his advice now and then. Sometimes out of curiosity. Sometimes out of sheer boredom.

(And see, I'm doing it again. I keep talking to you like you will actually read these letters someday. But Oda — he's next to me right now — says that it's a process blablabla, so I will keep working on that.)

The results are mixed.

To be entirely honest, most of the time, I don't even want any of these things to work because it seems too easy. And if it was that easy the entire time, it will make me think of all the things I could have done earlier, and if I do that —

You see where I'm going with this.

Then I will never stop thinking anything, and I already spend too much time with these pesky thoughts as it is. Regret, as tempting as it is, is entirely fruitless.

I thought that I would stop writing to you, but as it turns out, I have a lot of things to say. So, for now, you will simply have to listen.

(This time, I'm being sarcastic. I know that the only one listening to me is Belinda.)

Yours,

Dazai

Dear Chuuya,

I accidentally saw Atsushi and Akutagawa make out behind the barns today, and now my whole day is ruined. Ever since that one time — I don't

think I've told you about it yet, but I'm too lazy to do it right now — they have toned down all of their gross flirting — and I am glad that I am not subjected to that anymore — but who do they think they are thinking they need to put on an act in front of me?!

Anyways, I saw that and promptly turned away. I firmly believe that unless I am doing the kissing, any display of affection is revolting. I hope I will never have to see something that horrible again. I might even turn back to god and start praying again.

Hello stranger,

my hair has been getting pretty long. Even though everyone tells me it looks good, it's also ridiculously bothersome and HOT!!!! Seriously, I don't know how you do it. (And how you always make it look so pretty, too.) I hate you for that, you know. It should be illegal to be so effortlessly… pretty or whatever. Anyways, I let Emily cut it today, and this is the first time letting someone do that didn't make me want to tape all my mirrors shut. It looks decent, actually.

If we had any proper internet here, I would probably finally sign up on one of those dating apps just so people could tell me how pretty I am. Too bad I can't do that either, thanks to YOU.

Maybe I will just go into the village and let the old people fawn over me instead. Or try again with Oda.

We made out once, by the way. And it was great.

I hope you find that just as wonderful as me.

Yours,

Dazai ♥

Dear Chuuya,

I kissed Oda again! Just give me another few months, and I will have spent more time kissing him than you.

Hello Chuuya,

you know what's funny? When Oda packed some of my things, he made sure to bring a few of my books that I had lying around in your apartment,

and three of them were all for the game. Which means I am rereading them for the 15th time this week, but it also means that I made everyone else here — aside from the older folks who are probably homophobic — read the books too, so I have someone to talk to about them. It's the topic of our dinner conversations four out of seven days.

Today, I plan to discuss Kevin's alcohol problem.

I'm sure everyone has lots of thoughts on that.

I kind of wonder what yours would have been.

Hey you,

Emily went back today because her semester started, and it's making me feel things. Lots of them. It seems that every time I get used to someone, they leave again. And every time, as horribly dramatic as it sounds, I feel like a part of me breaks off, too. Given that there isn't much of me to begin with, you can imagine how little is left.

They told me that we can write each other letters, though. Ha! Maybe I can finally stop addressing them to you, Chuuya. Perhaps I can finally let go entirely. I told Emily that I was only at the farm for a 'vacation', and now it's been several months. No one takes a vacation that long. No one has the money in this economy! But she never tried to pry for any more information than that, and I didn't want to involve her in our business more than necessary… I guess, sometimes, I do understand where you are coming from.

I just wish that you would have believed me when I said that I had a plan. It would have worked, trust me. And you know what the ironic thing is? That life would not even have been that much more different than it is now. I always wanted to hear that silence again, the one you can only get out here on some forlorn farm remote from modern civilization. The only difference is that we would have run away together. I could have gotten you out of the mafia.

I mean, isn't that what you wanted? You said it was too late for you to get out, but I don't think that's true. I could have made it possible. I ran away from it once, too, after all.

All you had to do was trust me.

But I guess trust for people like us doesn't come easy. Isn't that right, Chuuya?

Sorry for my handwriting. It's just one of those nights.

Emily going back also makes me think of my own life back there. You know, you not only took away my choice but also my degree, right? I wouldn't be surprised if your fancy-schmancy mafia connections and intimidation tactics could probably get me back there, but that would require assuming I will ever go back to that city and that place. I am still working on letting go of that one.

I don't know if you can guess, but I never really bothered making myself a plan for the future. Mostly because I never planned to live that long, so the future for me was the next few weeks, at best, and the next few months, at worst. And why bother making plans when you assume you're going to be dust and ash by then? (Just FYI, I refuse to be cremated. If a zombie apocalypse ever happens, I do NOT want to become an ugly, stinky, brainless thing. DO NOT BURY ME!!!!) I only chose to study literature because reading was the only thing that came close to a hobby. I somehow deluded myself into thinking studying it would be fun. It wasn't. Not really. Nothing academic is ever fun. That's a lie our society tells young people, so they go into debt and give the government money. But I guess it was still better than doing something like business administration or economics. Can you imagine? One might as well shoot oneself in the head. But I never even considered what I could do with that degree, and now that I have all the time in the world to figure that out, I still don't know.

Maybe I should follow Oda's example and start writing my own book. He really loves doing that, which is bewildering sometimes because whenever I ask how it's going, all he does is whine about being blocked. But how hard it can be? I just don't know what I would even write about. Maybe about a drunk college student who breaks into a mafioso's apartment by accident. Doesn't that sound like a fun story? Not sure if I should make it tragic or happy, though. Not sure how the real story that it's based on ends.

The chicken are screaming for some reason. I have to go now.

I will talk to you later.

(Forever) yours,

Dazai

Hey Chuuya,

have you ever thought about how weird gender is? I have been doing that a lot lately. I just don't know whether I'm doing it because I have too much

time on my hands or because I finally do have the time to think about things I didn't have time to consider before.

Granted, I didn't have a lot of contact with my fellow peers, but I know that some of them were into the whole LGBTQ+ scene. I mean, we were all studying literature. What did you expect? The benefit of not talking to anyone, Chuuya, is that you instead get to listen to everything, and those people, boy, they had a lot to say.

Maybe that makes me a bad… member (I am not sure what I am exactly), but I never bothered to look into the history or all the different identities there are. I just know that I thought people were attractive, no matter what their gender was. If I ignored the crippling anxiety that came from socializing with those creatures, I could imagine myself sleeping with anyone too… as long as I was attracted to them. Because sleeping with someone ugly does not appeal to me. Is that a special thing, or is that just common sense? I really am not sure. I wish I could look it up but… no internet. Perhaps I will ask Emily to print out some articles for me next time. (They sent me a new book last time too!) Knowing that was enough for me, so I never bothered to dig deeper. And it still is enough for me.

Gender, on the other hand… is even more confusing than the bible.

Oda jokingly called me a princess a few days ago, and it made me feel some things. Nothing bad. The opposite, actually!

But maybe it just reminds me of you.

Then again, when I think about it, I really believe that I never actually considered myself to be a guy. When people referred to me as that, I didn't really mind but I always had this internal knowledge that it's not what I am, not really. I just never bothered to correct anyone because a) I didn't care enough either, and b) I didn't know what I wanted them to call me instead.

And I still think that way. Am I really male? A MAN? I don't think so. But do I mind getting called that? Not really. So what does that make me? I think I remember my classmates using the word nonbinary. Or gender-fluid? Again, I really wish we had an internet connection.

Damn you Nakahara Chuuya.

You make my life so difficult.

Dear Chuuya,

I'm pretty sure today would be my father's birthday, and it has brought up a few memories I didn't even know I still had — in such detail, at least. One of them was the day he sent me away.

I'm sure that tradition doesn't exist anymore but back then during my father's reign and his father's before that, there were two rituals to choose the successor that would eventually inherit the business.

The first one takes place at a young age but after two or three years of training with the country's best martial artists and assassins. When the boss deems his child ready, he throws them into a room with a few other people. Some of them homeless. Some of them children, too. Some with abilities. Some with murderous intentions. And then he lets them fight to the death. It's basically how they root out the weaklings.

Most of my siblings passed the test. Two of us didn't. One of them was me. I didn't feel like going through all of that, so I ran away. Of course, I was only seven years old, so my father's people found me. I was pretty sure he would either kill me for being a coward or throw me into that arena. It amounts to the same thing.

Up to this day, I am not sure why, but he didn't. He said he would, and then he sent me away to my grandparents. From my mother's side. I never met her, but I know that she was a worker in one of the mafia's brothels before she committed suicide. You know, in hindsight, I understand why my grandparents hated me so much. All three of us, my father, my mother, and me, none of us were good or noble people. All of us were pretty disappointing.

That was me.

The other one who didn't pass the test was Shuji. He got killed. I think he used to be my favorite, but it's been so long now.

That ritual is only there to make sure that they are even strong enough to stay in the mafia. The one that actually matters takes place years after when everyone is all grown up, and the boss either shows signs of passing soon or is already dead. It's similar, though. There is still a pit, and still a fight with only one winner except that the people fighting are all the siblings. You can probably guess what the winner gets, right?

Mori killed my father before that happened and spared my siblings that fight. In the end, they still all died. I think it's poetic in a way.

You know what… it feels good to share that even if I'll never get a reply back from you. Still very liberating.

Thank you, Chuuya.

I can't sleep, and I really miss you.

Dear Chuuya,

Emily is back again! Crazy how time runs, huh? So many months have passed already. I gave up on counting.

I'm not even sure what to tell you anymore.

I started working out with Oda now and then. I want a sexy butt. One of the cats gave birth, and although the kittens are precious, they're also BATSHIT INSANE. My legs are tired of being used as climbing trees! Akutagawa wears his hair in a ponytail now. At least, the ugly bangs are gone. Oda finished writing his book! Well, the first draft, anyway. He says he needs to change many things, but I've read it, and I don't think it needs that many changes at all. It's a masterpiece. Oh, Atsushi took up crocheting.

I think that's it?

Gotta go.

See you around, stranger.

Dear Person I hate most in the world,

I hope you are dead in a ditch somewhere.

I hope you are alive in a ditch somewhere, eternally tormented by guilt and sorrow for what you have done.

No, really… I hate you, but if you are dead, I will hate you even more, so do this one thing for me and be still alive so that I can someday tell you all these things myself instead of writing letters. Because it's been almost nine months. That's a pretty long time to be mad at someone, Chuuya.

Anyways, yesterday we went to the village's center, which is less of a center and more of a square with a few vendors and stalls, for the watermelon tasting. I am not sure why but everyone there is obsessed with me. Every time we go out, all those old people want to hug me and pinch my cheeks. And you know what the craziest part is? I let them. I think if you were here, you would be proud of me. However, since you are not and since you

probably never will even read any of this, I will let you in on a little secret. I think I'm proud of myself, too. Don't get me wrong… I don't think receiving a hug from an 85-year-old grandma who is lonely is the be-all and end-all of the universe, and if it was, I would not go out of my way to conform to it, but I guess it's nice to know that I can now. If I want to, then I can.

Whatever. I ended up tasting so many watermelons that I got a stomach ache. So I spent the rest of the evening on the couch in the house. One of the cats kept me company and even laid on my belly. I am still trying to decide whether I believe in that myth that says cats can feel when you're sick, but I'll tell you what: it sure —

PRESENT:

"It's from him." Oda meets his eyes. "Time to go back."

The apple in his hand slips out of his fingers and falls on the floor.

Dazai's world flutters with black colors — it's his lashes blinking, he realizes a few moments later as he watches the apple roll away. Then he feels himself squat down to pick it up again except that he doesn't rise back to his feet. He likes it down here. Fewer chances of toppling over and bruising yourself. He can't say the same about the apple.

A moment later, Oda squats down in front of him. "Akutagawa and Atsushi are packing their bags. Akutagawa wants to see Gin. We can go too if you want."

Or they can stay.

But that is a question that Dazai is not quite ready to hear yet, let alone *answer*.

"So Chuuya hasn't forgotten about us," he murmurs instead with a face. "I'm astonished. Truly! Can you believe it?"

Oda doesn't give him a reply, apparently on a mission to wait him out. How rude. He does help steady Dazai when he goes to stand up, though, then lets him wander through the kitchen and open and close cabinets just to hear something other than that wretched thing lodged in his ribcage.

"Does that mean no dinner?" Dazai asks.

“I can fix something up,” Oda offers.

“Please.”

The sound of heavy and hasty footsteps makes Dazai slowly crane his neck to see Akutagawa descend the stairs, Rashomon carrying his bags. He comes to a clearly irritated halt when he sees Oda start to chop vegetables.

“What are you doing?” he demands.

“What does it look like?” Dazai’s arms cross over the straps of his overall. “Dinner, obviously.”

Akutagawa’s dark eyes snap to him. “Didn’t you hear? We can finally go back. Pack your b—”

“Didn’t *you* hear me saying that we’re making dinner?”

“Do you really want to stay in this dump?”

“*I* want to have dinner.”

“You’re not even doing anything!”

“Well, you’re just standing around here and not leaving either, so that makes two of us saying things that aren’t technically accurate. Great job, Akutagawa-kun. Do you want a medal for that observation?”

Before Akutagawa can offer another useless addition to this conversation, Odasaku cuts in by waving his spatula between the two of them. “Akutagawa, why don’t you get the car ready?”

Akutagawa doesn’t look too happy about it. Still, like the good little soldier that he is, he obediently does as he’s told, leaving the house with a sour face that’s not quite pale anymore but instead red and splotchy from the sun.

When the sound of the door falling shut echoes through the house, Oda says, “there is something else.”

“What more delightful news do you have for me?” Dazai wonders aloud as he leans against the spotty wall behind him.

“Chuuya’s the new boss of the port mafia.”

Oh.

OH.

Now that…

That is interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Chuuya's POV and what's been happening in Yokohama!

(And I wanted to say thank you SO MUCH for 1000 kudos <3 I never expected this fic to get that kind of support like it did and I'm just really glad that you guys like it as much as I do! Working on it has been nothing but fun this entire time and a lot of of that is thanks to you! <3)

Chapter 15: 271 Days (Pt. I)

Chapter Notes

> Hello hello, thank you all for your patience regarding updates! Classes have started again, I got sick, took a writing break because of a block blahblahblah but I finally managed to edit this chapter. Again, I decided to split it into two parts simply because it's easier to edit and post that way, and because it will hopefully allow me to get back into a more regular updating schedule. Enjoy the Chuuya juice <3
>
> Warnings: (almost) major character death, descriptions of injuries, blood, and mild gore

YOKOHAMA, NINE MONTHS AGO:

“He will be fine. Don’t fret.”

Yosano ignores the unhelpful advice and continues clacking her fingernails against the headboard of the car. It’s the only sound disturbing the silence inside. “This isn’t just anyone,” she says. “That’s Chuuya out there. If anything happens to him, I will kill everyone outside, and then I will kill *you,* Fyodor.”

Most of the time, she enjoys the man’s masochistic tendencies and, therefore, his response to threats. Sometimes, like now, the delighted, heavy smile that curves around his mouth is irritating.

Yosano responds with a cutting glare.

Giving her an inch, Fyodor tones it down and looks ahead even though the only thing in front of them is the dark and unforgiving forest in the middle of nowhere. “Everything has worked out so far, has it not? Both the leaders of the port mafia and the guild are going to be dead from the virus in twenty-four hours. On the quest to save their boss, the mafia has pretty much taken out what is left of the guild. The only ones who survived are useless pawns that aren’t any more harmless than the dirt under your heels. Now what’s left is Lovecraft and that cursed child and Chuuya is taking care of them. And most importantly, your beloved is somewhere far, far away from all of this mess.”

“Don’t mock him,” Yosano warns quietly.

“I’m not.”

She is about to check his words for their credibility when a deafening wave of energy crashes against their car, forcing it back and sideways before either of them can do anything, let alone have enough time to get out. Yosano ends up hanging almost upside-down, still fine and still conscious except for a few bruises and scratches that she feels cutting her skin, before she unbuckles her seatbelt and god knows how manages to climb out with heaving lungs.

“Fyodor?” she calls as she hurries to the other side. He looks fine aside from a splinters on his face that match hers, but the crash must have knocked him unconscious. “Fedya, wake up.” Yosano has neither the time nor the patience to wait for that, so she makes sure to check that he isn’t in any compromising or life-threatening positions before dragging him out of the car and dumping him on the cold, hard ground lowering herself to hear him at least breathe.

He does.

He is breathing.

“That’s good,” she breathes out, chest sagging with relief that tastes like heroin. “You stupid son of a bitch are going to be just fine.”

Another explosion in the distance makes her eyes snack back up. Just what the hell is going on? Explosives were *not* part of this mission.

Chuuya did not make any signals that call for back-up either, so technically, she should trust the process and wait out.

To hell with that, though.

Yosano has lost one too many people that she cares about without any proper goodbyes in the last few weeks. Chuuya is not going to be one of them.

She makes sure her Glock is loaded before heading into the direction of the noises that are starting to sound not only louder with each second that passes but more frequent. Seriously, who brought a fucking tank to this battle, and why did they not see it? How did *Fyodor* not anticipate it?

They parked their car quite a good way off so it’s almost a ten-minute track through the woods. Yosano makes it in five.

She prepared herself for a lot of things on the way here. For a surprise ambush, for mafia reinforcement, for a bomb that got dropped off at the site but not… this. She almost stumbles when the earth beneath her fit dips all of a sudden, revealing a crater the size of a building.

There is no guild anymore. No Lovecraft. His partner is not in sight either. Even that abandoned building that was here before is nothing but a pile of rubble. It's all gone. The only one here is Chuuya. At least, Yosano thinks that's him. She recognizes the remnants of the clothes that are left on him, most of them torn apart. She definitely recognizes the hair from the back. But everything else —

The way he's lying in a crater of his own, smaller than the massive one, crumpled like he doesn't have the strength to get up anymore. Strange red marks carved into torn skin. And those explosions are coming from *him.*

Nakahara Chuuya cannot even stand anymore, and yet somehow, he keeps creating more and more craters around him, burying himself deeper and deeper as he makes garbled, inhuman noises every few moments.

"Chuuya," she calls.

Nothing.

"Chuuya, damn it, wake the fuck up!" Yosano hisses, taking a step towards him. "What the hell did you do?"

The force of his power is bigger this time, stronger. Almost like he is trying to force Yosano back from him, but it's nowhere near the same energy that tipped their car over then. Aside from dirt and god knows what else landing on her face, she is fine. Terrified to find out to see more of what Chuuya has become but physically fine.

He remains unresponsive, firing off one blast that echoes through the oppressive silence of this graveyard after another. It's weakner now, she notices though. Chuuya is getting weaker at an alarming speed.

Yosano finally manages to approach without getting her head blown off. The only thing coming out of Chuuya are tiny, baby explosions now, like those firecrackers you hear on New Year's eve. Heart hammering a dizzying rhythm in her chest, Yosano kneels down next to him and turns him over.

Her entire body freezes.

She knows it's Chuuya; it is. He just doesn't look like him. He has got lacerations all over his face and body, dark red blood streaming out of the corner of his eyes, nose, mouth, the gaping flesh wound in his lower abdomen, his *nails*. Even the markings that crawl up the slope of his cheeks bleed.

"What did you do?" she whispers as she grabs his bloody face with both of her hands and prays to whatever merciful god that might reside above them that her ability is still enough to save him. Because he is on the verge of death, and she has brought countless people back from that.

It's just that she is not sure whether the man in front of her is still human.

It hurts.

It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts —

Everything *hurts*.

- - -

"We're going to help you, Chuuya. Okay? You just have to hold on for a while longer. You have to fight. *Please fight."*

- - -

"I wish you would have told me what you're going to do so I could fucking understand what I'm dealing with here. I keep trying to heal you and it's not working. It's not an ability. It's not just injuries. It's not… I don't know how to fix this, Chuuya. I don't know how to fix you."

- - -

"How is he doing?"

"Stable for now, but… I've never seen anything like it. His body is both healing and deteriorating at the same time. It's like there are two organisms and one of them is trying to survive while the other one is dying."

"You think he'll make it?"

“It’s Chuuya. He has to.”

- - -

“Time to wake up. Seriously, Chuuya. *Wake up.”*

- - -

I was just… looking for a reason to stay. For a distraction. Something. Anything. And I found it. With you.

- - -

Time to wake up. Something in his body clicks into place, and Chuuya stirs awake. Even with his eyes too heavy to open just yet, he can sense that something is changed, that breathing feels different now. It hurts. Everything else hurts, too. But somehow he is alive; that’s all that matters.

YOKOHAMA, EIGHT MONTHS AGO:

Readjusting the eye patch on his face, Chuuya listens to Kouyou rant somewhere behind him. He tries to listen, anyway, but he can’t help but stare whenever he looks into the mirror, trying to find something that he recognizes, *someone* that he recognizes in the reflection.

Aside from his hair, he comes up empty.

His left eye is useless and hideous now, showing nothing but the white sclera and therefore hidden away behind an eyepatch. The other one still works, just doesn’t really look the same now. But maybe that’s only Chuuya. Then there are the markings that have permanently etched themselves into his skin. One on his right cheek, winding down the slope of his face short in front of his nose and then around itself like a snake. The other is right below his scalp. There are more under his clothes. A full-body tattoo that Chuuya never really agreed to. All of these changes are only superficial, in the end.

What’s different is the way he moves now — stiffer, slower, clumsier, the way he breathes because it still feels like his lungs are on fire, just not enough to make him pass out anymore, and simply the way he *is.* It’s like feeling that initial blazing rush of corruption back on the battlefield against Lovecraft except that it never stops. It burns on and on and on.

Chuuya looks at his reflection and he can't for the life of himself remember anymore what he felt like before he did this to himself. What it felt like not to burn endlessly.

He is about to lift his hand and readjust his eyepatch for the hundredth time today when he catches someone else's gaze in the mirror instead. Kouyou's.

"Are you even listening?" she snaps.

"Of course." He wasn't, but he can guess what Kouyou was talking about anyway. They have been dealing with the same problems for the last month. "Our shipments are being ransacked by pirates, more and more warehouses are being raided, and all our partners are backing out. Does that cover it?"

Port mafia is slowly *dying.*

And, frankly, he is happy to watch it perish.

"Did you also hear that there have been more crimes reported this month than there have been in eight years?"

"Only because we're not the ones committing the crimes anymore," Chuuya mutters, getting up from the vanity mirror, "and no one is blackmailing law enforcement to change the statistics."

"Chuuya."

"Ane-san, I know it's hard, but so what if the organization is going to ruins? It's your chance to get out of this mess once and for all and start living." He shrugs. "After what happened with the guild and now with us, it's bound to be chaotic for a while, but the dust will settle eventually."

Kouyou stops pacing for a minute and lets out a sigh instead. She even rubs her temple. *That's* how stressed she must be. Usually, a perfectly trained smile and a cup of tea laced with a shot of bourbon would do the trick. "Go where?"

"I don't know," he says honestly. "Isn't there someplace you've always wanted to visit?"

"And then what?" she asks quietly. "I've spent the last twelve years of my life here. I gave up my education. I don't have a profession. I have no family. I'm a wanted criminal."

Chuuya swallows. “Then you start anew.”

It’s what he plans to do. Because their situations are not that different. Pretty much the same, actually. Chuuya was born as an experiment, grew up as a street rat, and was eventually groomed to be an executive for a criminal syndicate. He does not have an official identity outside of the mafia because he was never part of that life, the one where you wake up in the morning, go to school or college or work, and bitch over your boring, everyday life and then come home to a family, or a partner, or to your pets and cook, then go to bed to do it all over again.

He never had any of that.

But that doesn’t mean the mafia is all there is.

“Suppose I start a new life,” Kouyou says, “and suppose you do too after you find that boy of yours. What about Gin? What do they do? What about Hirotsu? What about my girls? What about every other person who has nowhere to stay but here? What about them?”

“They’re grown people,” Chuuya mutters. “They’ll figure it out.”

Except he knows not all of them are grown. He wasn’t when he came here. Kouyou wasn’t. Gin wasn’t —

There are a lot of kids here, too.

But that’s manageable. Chuuya can make sure the kids find somewhere good and safe to stay. He can do that.

“You did this, Chuuya. You can’t just walk away and pretend it isn’t your problem.”

The official version of the past events is something along the lines of: the Russian Bratva boss is responsible for the death of Mori Ougai, an act of revenge for both his mother’s murder and a botched assassination attempt, letting Chuuya off the hook.

But the demise of a man like Mori can only pass without any dangerous rumors surfacing for so long, and Kouyou is a bright woman. She knows what happened *before* the port mafia started to steadily lose ground against the guild. She knows about Dazai, his recruitment, and his traceless disappearance not even a few hours later. She knows about Akutagawa Ryuunosuke and Atsushi Nakajima’s sudden and inexplicable desertion. But most importantly,

she knows about what Dazai meant to Chuuya and the kind of stupid things Chuuya is capable of doing when he loves someone.

Kouyou just never brought it up before.

Chuuya halts in his steps.

“You can’t topple a leader,” he hears her say, “then expect his people to fend for themselves.”

But getting rid of Mori was his only goal. If Mori is gone, no one, except for a few people, knows that Dazai is the son of the Tsushima Boss. If Mori is gone, Dazai is safe. If Mori is gone, there is nothing more to do, nothing else to accomplish, because that’s *it*.

“Mori would have died eventually,” Chuuya finally says, not turning around just yet. “It just so happens that he did sooner rather than later. Would that be my fault too?”

“Mori also had a right hand.”

And that’s —

Chuuya spins around to shoot Kouyou an explosive glare. “*No*. No fucking way. I’m not doing that.”

Even his graceless response is not enough to deter her from her objective. “You’re the best person for the job.”

Chuuya shakes his head, refusing to hear a word of this.

“You’re strong. You clearly know how to strategize.” It’s supposed to be a jab at the way ‘he’ took out the boss, but it’s wrong because he was working with Dostoevsky and Yosano the entire time. Sure, he contributed, but this whole affair would have been ten times messier if it had just been him alone. Chuuya would have probably already been stamped as a traitor by now. “You’re respected and liked by your subordinates and the other executives. You could make the port mafia something Mori never managed to do.”

“Why don’t *you* take over?” If anything, Kouyou is the right person for this position. “You have way more experience, Ane-san. You’re not a traitor.”

The sound of Kouyou’s soft laughter cuts through the room like icy snow. She lifts her sleeve to smother it before she speaks. “Oh, lad.

Don't you think that if I truly wanted this job, I could have taken it for myself years ago?"

Chuuya's hands start shaking silently.

"Mori was a powerful, brilliant mind, but even he had human urges. All it would have taken was one jab in the right place. Just one." Losing some of the humor, Kouyou folds her hands together again. "But I knew that doing that would mean taking over way more responsibility than I ever wished for. Training you brats, working with my people, and stepping on some big-headed toes was enough for me. I never wanted the job, and I still don't. It's that simple."

Chuuya's exhales harshly. "And I do?"

"You should have thought about that before you decided to turn everything upside down to keep that boy safe." Her lips purse in evident disappointment. "I believed that I taught you that, but I see that the lesson didn't stick. Do not worry, though. I will be by your side in the future. You will be the official head representing us, but you will never be truly alone. That much I can promise you."

Chuuya doesn't want this.

He doesn't want to be the boss of an organization that he actually resents deep inside.

He doesn't want the long hours, the endless meetings, having to solve one crisis after another, and ordering executions on his own people. He doesn't want to ruin himself into a million tiny pieces again. He doesn't want the even bigger target on his head. On the heads of the people he cares about.

Accepting this position means that he will never find Dazai and try to fix what he has broken because Dazai will *never* be safe again as long as Chuuya is alive.

And that means —

Corruption, the scars, his goddamn eye, the neverending pain, all the people that died in the battles against the guild, Mori, and most of all, betraying Dazai —

All of it would have been for nothing. Absolutely nothing. Because Chuuya will end up in the same position all over again except with a spotlight on him that's a dozen times brighter than before.

Chuuya gazes silently at his mentor for a while. Of all the people, he thought she would understand. Once upon a time, she tried to escape, too, and it cost her the life of someone she loved. Why does she want to continue the cycle?

“You will have to kill me before I ever take this position,” Chuuya finally tells her. “I’m sure even a corpse would be happier to take it than me.”

He knows that the ruin of the port mafia is his fault. Of course, he does. But as he said before… he is content watching the flame flicker out of existence.

Chuuya doesn’t bother calling *“I’m home”* anymore when he closes his apartment door behind him since the two people… temporarily living here are usually too busy to hear him anyway. Ever since he got better, and Yosano stopped having to monitor his condition around the clock to make sure he wouldn’t collapse and die, she picked up her business as an underground doctor again — and it’s been booming lately because of the increased criminal activity around town. They cleared out the third guest room to set up her work space, but most of the time, her patients are not in the condition to go anywhere anyway. Dostoevsky, the one houseguest that Chuuya did not ever plan to see residing here, spends most of the night in the library slash office, either on the phone or on video calls with his own people.

Tonight, it seems quiet but not empty, and Chuuya follows the sounds to the living room, where he finds Yosano with her feet in Dostoevsky’s lap as he gives her a massage. A plate with cheese and grapes is on the coffee table. A half-finished bottle of wine that looks too tempting not to snag away.

“How’d it go?” Yosano asks as he pours the bottle’s heart content down his throat.

Whether he is drinking because of that god-awful conversation with Kouyou, this shitty domestic sight in his living room even though nothing about it is domestic, or because he desperately needs something else to feel for a few hours, he doesn’t know and has no patience to find out.

“Shitty,” he mutters before falling down on the couch next to her, still clutching the bottle.

When he raises it to take another sip — or empty it entirely — Yosano

beats him to it and steals it away. “I did not bring you back from death’s doorstep to let you destroy your liver.”

“Wine is healthy,” Chuuya argues, trying to take it back.

“Yes, a glass of it. Not an entire bottle.”

After a few moments of fruitless tugging, Chuuya gives up and settles on shooting her a glower before leaning forward to look at Dostoevsky. “Did you fix it?”

“Still working on it,” is the answer — as per usual.

Chuuya breathes out an aggravated breath through his nose. “How long does it take to fix a damn radio?”

“I would not have to fix it if you just had given your friends a functioning one.”

“I checked it before, and it did work!” Chuuya snaps. “Besides, I was in fucking a rush.”

“Unfortunately, that does not make me work any faster,” Dostoevsky drawls.

“Well, maybe that’s because you’re here rubbing Akiko’s feet instead of wor—”

“All right, boys,” Yosano cuts in. “Let’s not bring my feet into this.” She shoots Chuuya a look. “If not for those feet, you’d be dead now.”

“Sorry,” Chuuya mutters. “I just — what if we’ll never fix it?”

“*I* am fixing it,” Dostoevsky butts in ever so helpfully. “You are just complaining.”

“Fine. What if you never fix it?”

“I said I would fix it, and I will. I never said that it would happen overnight.”

This time, Yosano gives the bottle to Chuuya willingly. Once it’s empty and his chest not as cold anymore, Chuuya lets his head fall back and stares at the ceiling before saying, “Kouyou wants me to take over port mafia.”

He is greeted with silence. It isn’t shocked silence, though. Neither of

them looks surprised by that concept when he scans their faces.

“What did you say?” Yosano asks.

“That I’d rather die?”

“Dramatic,” she comments. “And *rude* after all the work that I did.”

“It’s crazy, right?” Chuuya says tentatively. “To go through all this trouble to kill Mori only to take over his position?”

“Not when it’s a coup,” Dostoevsky offers.

“But it wasn’t.”

He shrugs. “It could be.”

“I just said that I’d rather it wasn’t. If that means port mafia crumbles, maybe it’s time to let it.”

To his great grievance, that makes Dostoevsky snort dryly. “If you think you not taking the position will be the port mafia’s end, you’re even more naive than I thought.”

“Fyodor,” Yosano warns.

But Dostoevsky is on a roll. “The mafia has existed for hundreds of years, and it will exist for another hundred years whether you become the boss or not. The only thing you can change is who will get to make decisions. Either it’s you or someone else. And I promise you, Chuuya, someone will step up to take over.”

So does it really matter whether Chuuya will take the job or not?

“Great.” His shrug is half-hearted at best. “I see no reason to interfere.”

“And it will not set you free.”

His dull expression hardens.

Dostoevsky catches on on that and sets his claws into it, digs deeper. “Whether you want or not, right now, you’re probably one of the most popular choices for the job. The other boss will not like that. During such an unstable period as a change of leadership, no one will be able to afford competition. So they will either have to show that you’re a subordinate…” He doesn’t have to explain Chuuya’s own plan to him.

His smile says more than enough. "... or they will have to get rid of you. It's fairly simple: to them, you're going to be a Dazai."

"Not to mention," Yosano says softly, "the new boss could be worse than what the mafia had so far. Mori was a souless bastard and eventually he would have attempted to get rid of Dazai, but he was fairly decent to the city. The last eight years were good."

"When did you two become the port mafia's advetisors?"

He doesn't bother looking at Dostoevsky, knowing that he will only find contempt and mockery there, but he does glance at Yosano whose smile is sad and understanding.

Eyes fluttering shut in exhaustion, Chuuya curses softly.

Deep inside, he has known this for a while now. It's the nature of mafia business. Hell, the nature of Chuuya's position as Mori's right-hand man. One leader can't die without another one rising. But that day was supposed to be far away in the future. Not *now*. And when Chuuya made the decision to kill Mori, he prioritized Dazai's safety over the eventual possibility of him having to take over afterwards because he knew if he didn't, he'd hesitate. He couldn't allow himself to hesitate.

Now that future is here, though. Chuuya can't deny it any longer.

So even if he spent his whole life on the run, he knows he'd probably do it with a heavy heart and an even heavier conscience when the new boss turns out to be some kind of a souless bastard.

Who are the candidates?

Ace, for sure. He has always been leering for Mori's seat; that's no secret. And the things he would do with that kind of power… when he already treats his subordinates as human jewels to be kept?

Chuuya's stomach curls in disgust at the thought alone.

So who else?

Kouyou said no.

Verlaine? Chuuya doubts that. Being boss would mean leaving the basement. But if he did try, they would be fucked as well.

With only these two, that leaves an entire city, a country even, of

other candidates who must have heard about the open spot by now and are probably running here to secure it. It could be anyone.

Chuuya's fingers curl into a fist. He doesn't like that. He really doesn't.

"I need another bottle of wine," he decides. "And, Dostoevsky, you really gotta fix that radio. *Now."*

Whether it's because Chuuya is a pain in his ass for the next few days or whether something finally gives away, at long last, Dostoevsky announces that the radio should be working now. Chuuya's heart, when the three of them crowd around it, is beating so hard that he feels like he's going to puke it out at any given moment.

He is well aware that whatever is waiting for him on the other end definitely won't be warm or welcoming. Dazai will probably have a lot of things to say, none of them friendly, but Chuuya will be happy to deal with that with Dazai *here.* In-person.

Taking a deep breath, Chuuya clicks the button on the radio. "Akutagawa-kun, it's Chuuya. Come in."

They wait a few moments.

And a few more.

And some more —

"Akutagawa-kun," Chuuya repeats. "Come in."

"He's probably not hearing it," Yosano says. "It's not like he will carry the thing around the whole time, right?"

Chuuya's face is already bleeding disappointment, but it makes sense, yeah. "I guess." Then he looks at Dostoevsky. "Can we record a message that they will get as soon as they turn it on?"

Dostoevsky nods and points at a button on the radio.

"Okay. Uh, give me a moment." When that only earns him two blinking expressions, Chuuya snaps, "What? I need a moment to think, and you're distracting me."

Dostoevsky lets out an insufferable sigh but gets up. Yosano hesitates. "Tell Sakunosuke... "

Chuuya waits.

“Ah, fuck that,” she mutters, rubbing the bridge of her nose as she gets up. “I’ll tell him myself when he gets back.” After giving Chuuya’s shoulder a pat, she leaves the patio as well.

Still, with nothing but the city’s skyline and the wind surrounding him, no distractions, Chuuya pushes the button, and the words don’t come out.

Because what the hell is he even supposed to say?

That day everything happened so quickly. Yumeno’s curse. The guild. Dazai. Mori. Knocking Dazai out and sending him as far away as possible was the first thing that came to his mind to spare Dazai from whatever Mori would eventually have done to get rid of a potential threat to his throne.

And even though, Chuuya is glad that Dazai wasn’t here for any of it, he knows that he should have done things differently. He should have talked to Dazai. They should have worked together.

In the end, no matter how much Chuuya wants to keep this one person safe, save one person in his life without having to bury them eventually, it was still Dazai’s decision to make. Not Chuuya’s.

“Akutagawa-kun,” he says, “if you can hear this, then give the radio to Dazai.” He huffs out a quiet laugh. “And if Dazai refuses to listen to it, then just, I don’t know, listen to it yourself and get back to me.

“Mori has been dead for a month. The guild is taken care of. And the port mafia is… well, it’s slowly collapsing in on itself, and as much as I would like to see it gone, I can’t deny any longer that someone will swoop in and take over Mori’s place eventually. I’m thinking about doing it myself.” Even after all the arguments he has heard, and after all the thinking he has done, the words still feel heavy on his tongue. So damn wrong. “I’d like to hear what you have to say about that.”

And then because he hasn’t even said it yet, “I’d like to hear it in person, so come back. I know I said some things when I… when all of that stuff went down, but I also know that you’re smart, Dazai. I just wanted you to be safe, and you don’t make it exactly easy.” It doesn’t really feel enough. Any of it. But that’s also because he is probably talking to the radio and not an actual person on the other end. “This is a shitty apology, I know, and I’m sorry about that, too, but you can yell at me as much as you want to when you come back, or, I don’t

know, give me the silent treatment, or poison my food. You can do all of that when you're back, and then we'll figure things out, okay? I hope you're okay wherever you are. Get back to me as soon as you get this.

"Talk to you soon," he finally says and does what Dostoevsky showed him earlier. His chest falls with a heavy exhale.

The sun in the distance begins to set.

"Did I push the wrong button?"

"For the tenth time," Dostoevsky mutters in a low, sleepy voice as half of his face is buried in a cup of black tea, "you didn't. I looked at it, and the message will get played as soon as the person on the other end turns on the radio."

"What if their end of the communication isn't working then?" Chuuya asks instead, pacing through his kitchen. "You had to fix ours, right? What if they have to fix theirs too, and they don't know?"

"I fixed it for both sides. It's a two-way radio, so if one side works, the other one does, too."

"What if their radio is smashed to pieces? That would work, too?!"

"Then you won't be getting a response any time soon," Dostoevsky says. For something so *fucking important,* he looks way too casual about it. Not only that, but he seems to think it's funny too.

A fresh swell of frustrated anger sweeps through Chuuya, and he lets it out on the kettle, smashing it down so hard that it leaves a dent on his counter. *Great.*

"You're making up all these unlikely scenarios," he hears Dostoevsky murmur softly, "and yet you avoid the most rational possibility."

It's been three days since Chuuya left the radio message.

Three days without any response.

Maybe something really is wrong with the radio.

Maybe Akutagawa simply hasn't checked it yet. Maybe he only does weekly. Or monthly.

Maybe… Chuuya didn't just send them away but to their deaths, and there is no one to get the message anymore.

Or maybe… Dazai just doesn't want to come back.

Unlike his useless subordinate, Chuuya does not only use the radio once every blue moon. No. He carries it with him everywhere, and he talks to it all the time as well. Just in case that one of these days, someone on the other end will actually pick up.

Chuuya narrates his car rides to the port mafia base. He describes emptying the dishwater. He recounts all the doubts swirling around in his head about the upcoming days — about the *take-over*. And he slurs drunk apologies when he collapses on his bed after another bottle of wine.

No one ever answers.

"All right, I get it! I fucking get it, Dazai. You're angry. You hate me. And I really fucked up. I get it, okay? But do all of that *here*. Come home, and I'll let you do anything you want to me to get it out of your system. But this — this sucks. One peep. One word to let me know you're still alive. That's all I'm asking for. *Please."*

On the night before Chuuya is supposed to march into the mafia headquarters and claim that wine-colored scarf for himself, Yosano and Dostoevsky host dinner. A real one.

Although the three of them have been living together for two and half months now — of which Chuuya spent almost one entirely in bed, trying to piece his body back to its full strength… or any strength at all — their eating habits have been lacking, at best, and piss-poor, at worst. It's either take-out or grabbing whatever scraps they find in the fridge because all three of them are too busy to cook properly.

(Chuuya feels like if he ever went to college, this is what it would feel like.)

(It makes him miss Oda.)

(It makes him miss Dazai and the way he never contributed to helping out and the way he nonetheless acted like it was all his doing. It makes him miss Dazai more than humanly possible.)

Eating a cooked, proper meal for the first time in ages aside, Chuuya is not a fan of it. Having a dinner feels like they're celebrating something, and taking the title of the port mafia boss is not worth celebrating.

It's…

It's a means to an end.

It's just another sacrifice.

Then again, maybe they're not celebrating but trying to get him drunk enough to stop worrying about it.

" — set up a station in the infirmary." When Chuuya keeps looking off into nowhere, Yosano's warm fingers land on top of his hand and squeeze. "Are you still with us, darling?"

"Trying not to be," Chuuya mutters and shoves the food on his table back and forth. There's a hole in his stomach, and it has no place for the Russian meatballs that Dostoevsky single-handedly cooked up— even if they do smell surprisingly good. Just not enough to get down his throat.

Yosano never downright urged him to take the job. Not like Kouyou or Dostoevsky. But he knows she agrees with her bed toy, agrees that this scenario is the best out of the other ones. Right now, she seems to falter on that front, too. Her usual expression of glitter and gold twisting into something tired, something complicated and guilty.

Chuuya spares her the need to come up with yet another pep talk and gets to his feet. The chair makes an awful scraping sound. "I'll go have a smoke. Don't… " He just flicks his fingers because he is too goddamn drained to finish his sentence and tell him not to go after him.

They never listen anyway.

Outside, he finishes his first cigarette and watches the ember die out before lighting up another one. Behind him, he hears the sounds of the door opening and closing.

Of course, Yosano couldn't stay away.

She settles next to him where he is leaning against the railing and wordlessly steals a cigarette from him, lights it up, and then takes a deep drag.

“Maybe you can fake your death after a few years,” she jokes, “and escape… to some faraway city and live in a bungalow with all the strays you keep picking up.”

If Dazai had responded —

If Dazai had somehow forgiven him and said, *“yes”* to all of the things Chuuya told him and agreed that leaving was the best option… that’s the kind of life he would have made for the two of them.

The irony is not lost on him.

Blowing out the smoke, Chuuya breathes out a quiet, hoarse laugh. “What about the poor city *then*?”

“By then, you will have a right hand that will take over, of course.”

Chuuya exhales. *Of course.*

“Listen,” Yosano says then, a bit quieter, “if you don’t want to do this, then say the word and back out now. I will get a car and get us the hell away from here, so we can look for our people instead. But if you do… I will be there every step of the way as well. Dostoevsky went through the same thing years ago; he’ll be able to help out now and then. You won’t be alone.”

If Dazai had responded, Chuuya would have still considered the first option. But Dazai didn’t. And what else is out there for Chuuya? He used to think that he didn’t mind being alone, that it was just the way things were for him, and that it was okay, but now…

Now he does mind. It doesn’t feel good to be alone. Chuuya loathes it.

So either way, no matter what he chooses, he will end up losing something.

Instead, Chuuya glances over his shoulder. “Do you really trust him?” The glass doors are tinted, so Dostoevsky isn’t visible through them, but they both know who he means.

“Trust?” Yosano echoes. “Hell, no. But he is useful. And I don’t need to trust him to accept that or sleep with him.”

Chuuya can’t help but laugh genuinely this time, even if the sound is fleeting.

“I will become the boss of the port mafia tomorrow,” he says after a

long while. “No getaway cars or escapes, but I will gladly accept your offer of helping me out. I have a feeling I’ll need it.”

“Hey, Dazai. I don’t know whether you even received my first massage, so I’m not sure what you know and what not, but today, two months after Mori’s death, I took over the port mafia. Crazy, huh? Yeah, I’m still trying to get used to this stupid title as well. It was easier than I thought, to be honest. We had a meeting among the executives, took a vote, and… that’s it. The only one who was against me was Ace because he’s been after the job for a while now, but everyone kept vetoing him. I’m sure he’s already planning a coup, but I’ll deal with that once I reach that bridge.

“Anyways. We've got a few turbulent months ahead of us, so maybe it’s best to leave things as they are right now. If you’re safe, then I hope you’re doing okay. If you’re not… then come home, and I’ll find a way to make it happen somehow.” Chuuya’s next breath is a little miserable, a little sad. “The left side of the bed has been pretty cold without you anyway.

“So, what I’m trying to say is that things are changing, but you will always have a place here. And I’m sorry for not realizing that sooner.”

Even after all the weeks of radio silence, Chuuya still waits after finishing his transmission. He always waits in case someone responds. And no one ever does.

Chapter 16: 271 Days (Pt. II)

Chapter Notes

warnings: poisoning, execution (not very explicit), implied sexual content between Chuuya and characters that aren't Dazai

See the end of the chapter for more notes

YOKOHAMA, SEVEN MONTHS AGO:

"... I said I was here for business, so do not worry. No one knows."

"You better," Chuuya huffs as he skims the words of the documents on his desk before flipping to the next page. "I have enough to deal with without people suspecting I'm in cahoots with the guy who killed Mori."

"Hey," Dostoevsky's voice says *too fucking close* above him. The fucker made himself comfortable on the edge of the desk, blocking all of the excellent lighting. "That was all you, my friend. I only agreed to be the scapegoat because Mori had it coming anyway."

Chuuya plasters a glaringly false smile on his face. "A question: how do I say *fuck you* in Russian?"

"I can tell you what *I want to* means, too."

"No thanks. *Fuck you* is more than enough."

"It means *spasybo bolschoye, Fyodor."*

Chuuya's eyes narrow as he spares him a look. He somehow doubts that's the actual translation.

"So, how has the job been treating you so far?"

"It's boring," Chuuya growls despite himself. "It's hell. I wasn't made to do paperwork all day and tell my sub— executives what to do while stuck in this damn office. And I barely even get to eat."

Case in point: the salad bowl that has been standing on the side of his desk for the last hour. Untouched.

"All beginning is rough. What about that man you were talking about yesterday? Ace?"

Chuuya gives up on doing two things simultaneously and tosses the pen in his hand away. Instead, he leans back in his chair and grabs the salad bowl. He might as well use this opportunity to eat.

“Loud to oppose me in every step I take but so far, baseless,” he grumbles after he takes a bite. “And I can’t just… kill the guy when he hasn’t done anything so far except being annoying as fuck.”

Dostoevsky strokes his chin in thought. “You have to tread carefully. Act too quickly, and your subordinates might think you’re too rash and ambitious. Act too late, and you will not only have one angry and humiliated subordinate but an entire rebellion from the inside. Speaking of which,” he turns to Chuuya, “have you already put out feelers to see whether there are any…” Dostoevsky stops short when he gets a good look at him. “Chuuya?”

Chuuya is too busy clutching his stomach because something —

Something is very wrong with him.

His eyes fall down to the salad bowl at the same time as Dostoevsky’s.

“Please tell me you made that yourself.”

Wincing from the numbing pain that starts to creep through his whole body, Chuuya shakes his head. “Got it from… call Yosano…”

“I guess I should have mentioned to never eat anything that is not prepared by you or your people sooner,” Dostoevsky murmurs while he’s already pressing the phone to his ear. “Akiko, my treasure. An emergency.”

“So today, someone tried to poison me in case you’re wondering why I sound like that. Just so you know: it does not feel good, so don’t ever try it. Pl—”

“Who are you talking to?”

“To Dazai, obviously.”

“You’re not talking to Dazai. You’re talking to a radio. And what are you doing sitting up already? I told you to rest — give me that!”

“Oi, stop i—”

“Hey Dazai, if you really are listening, do me a favor and come home

because your boyfriend is the worst patient I've ever had in my entire life. Even *you* were better! Now excuse us, but we have important matters to attend to. And Sakunosuke — whatever it is that you're doing? Stop it and get your ass over here. Please. Chuuya could use a bodyguard —"

"I DON'T!

"— and I could use you. Yosano *over."*

Three failed assassination attempts later, Chuuya is *tired.*

He is tired of feeling himself die over and over again, only to get brought back and spend the next few days feeling like a breathing corpse. He is tired of hearing the names of the people that wanted him dead this time — always someone irrelevant that was most likely roped into doing it, never the actual puppet master. And he is tired of executing his people, too.

Fights…

Fights are fights. People die in fights. He's used to that kind of blood on his hands.

But executions have never been his style, and yet here he is, watching another person slump lifelessly to the floor.

After it's done, Kouyou touches his shoulder, intending to lead him away, but he doesn't budge. Not yet.

"It will get easier with time," she says when he keeps standing there and looking as his subordinates take care of the body. "I watched Mori go through the same spiel too many times to count before he eventually weeded out all the people that were working against him."

"And how many people died for that?" Chuuya asks flatly. "How many more will have to die just so I can sit in that office and push around money?"

"As many as it takes," is all she says.

Chuuya can't think like that about human lives. He doesn't want to become that kind of boss either, even if it would make this job a whole lot easier. "These weren't my enemies… they were puppets." The night wind harshly whips against his face. "And you and I both

know whose."

Kouyou folds her hands together, her mouth a thin line. "Be that as it may, Ace has made no direct move against you so far. You cannot punish him for a theory, just like Mori did not punish him for being a coward and a schemer."

"I guess I will have to find proof then."

"I'm so glad that you took the time to see me," Chuuya says, leaning back in the chair and flashing the man across from him a dry smile, "seeing as you've been pretty busy."

Ace doesn't match his grin. Considering that Chuuya is currently sitting in the seat that *he* desperately wanted but failed to get…. he doesn't blame him. It must suck. "Let's cut to the chase. What did you call me for?"

Chuuya hums, nodding. "I wanted to inform you personally that I'll be withdrawing the guards stationed at our casinos. Right now, I require their forces elsewhere."

Ace balks. "The casinos are one of our three highest incomes. You can't just take away the guards!"

"I already did." Chuuya makes a face. "Half an hour ago, actually."

"What if someone tries to rob us? What about the money?!"

"Well, *I* was thinking you could use the subordinates at your disposal. I've heard you have quite the team of loyal subjects. And so many. Even after the guild." Chuuya's fingers lift to play with the ends of his scarf. "It's a good thing you have always been excellent at, working on your own, or else I would have made sure to leave you, at least, some of our men. But there's no need for that, right?"

"If we lose money because of you —"

"Not because of me," Chuuya corrects with his index finger wagging back and forth. "I told you in advance so you can take the necessary precautions to keep our shops safe and sound same before. If you, as an executive, haven't trained your subordinates well enough to do such a basic job as guarding a casino, that's on you."

"Telling me an hour later is not in advance," Ace growls, slamming his

hands on the desk. “And what do you need all these men for anyway? Protecting that boy of yours?!”

Chuuya’s not surprised that Ace knows about Dazai; it did make the rounds back then. That doesn’t mean he has to like it, though.

“Someone in the mafia seems to be keen on killing me.” Chuuya cocks his head in a silent challenge. “I have to take that threat seriously until it is resolved. You understand that, don’t you?” Oh, but he doesn’t let him finish. Not quite. “Well, you would if you were the boss. But maybe wait a few years. If you’re lucky, the executives who didn’t want you as their leader will already be dead by then.” Chuuya shrugs. “Oh, and Ace? I wouldn’t waste too much time. Or else, word might get out before your subordinates get to work.”

Ace’s stony face quivers with rage, yet all he can do is spin around and stalk out of the office. Chuuya watches him leave. The feeling swirling around in his head isn’t quite as satisfied as his smile. As fun as it is to provoke the greasy-haired bastard, Chuuya did not want to pick up a fight with one of his executives so shortly after ascension. But he is also sick of seeing death’s doorstep. It is not that interesting. Just tiring.

Picking up his phone, Chuuya calls a number and presses the screen to his ear as he waits for the other end to pick. When they do, he says, “spread the word.”

While he waits for the ultimate confrontation with Ace — because it will come, he is sure of that — Chuuya decides to bring the radio to one of the best mechanics the mafia has.

Yosano was right: Dostoevsky is useful. He keeps the apartment clean. He cooks sometimes. He manages to run a powerful Russian crime syndicate while being in another country half the time. He obviously knows his way around leadership and seizing control. He is good with technology. And he is endlessly entertaining.

But just because he is functional doesn’t mean that Chuuya has to 100% trust the man, especially with something as precious as this:

“And you say it’s not working? Looks fine to me,” the woman, Suzume, says, inspecting the piece of tech.

“Sure,” Chuuya says, “except that the person on the other end isn’t responding. Take a look at it and tell me if there is anything, even the

slightest thing, off about it, okay?"

Because Dostoevsky *is* good with tech, and even though Chuuya isn't an idiot about it either, there are things he simply doesn't know. Things he wouldn't know about mechanics and radios *unless someone told him.*

He is not going to take his chances here.

His hands slide into the back of his pants to fish out his wallet, but Suzume takes a few hurried steps away, shaking her head.

"Oh no, the boss is not going to pay me," she says. "Do I look like a fool to you? I mean, do I look like a fool to you, boss!? Sorry. But no payment. Seriously."

Right. Chuuya forgets about that far more often than he cares to admit. He glances around the workshop, taking in all the makeshift constructions Suzume comes up with daily: weapons, ability amplifiers, protective gear. Accepting money from him might not be considered okay anymore, but he can give the department better funding. God knows, they deserved that ages ago already.

"Can you do it?" Chuuya asks instead, pocketing his wallet again.

"Of course, I can," Suzume confirms with a wink. Her eyes linger on his face, on the visible markings there, but for once, he does not feel the usual disgust crawl over her features. It's more of a… flirtatious curiosity, like admiring someone's eyes. "I'm the best at what I do. Does this job have a certain deadline?"

"No, take your time if that means being more thorough. Get back to me as soon as you have something."

"Got it, boss."

Boss.

He really needs to get used to the title.

In the end, it's Chuuya who comes back to the workshop first — not even a day later.

When Suzume sees him, her smile is bright but oozing nerves. "Got impatient, huh? Well, that's fair. I was going to report soon anyways. I just, uh," her hands trail over her dark-blue overall, "wanted to get

out of this first."

Chuuya waves her off. "So you found something?"

She makes a face. "Nope. Sorry, boss. It looks to be working perfectly."

It's not like he hasn't considered the possibility that the person on the other end simply doesn't want to talk to him anymore. Or ever. But there was still a tiny spark of hope in his chest that it was something else causing the radio-silence, frail but there.

"You're 100% sure?"

"I ran it by all my colleagues as well. It's working, boss." She offers him an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid you will have to find those people some other way."

Apparently.

"Thank you anyways," Chuuya says, accepting the radio when she hands it to him and ignoring the heavy disappointment that drapes over him like a second layer of skin. "I actually came here for something else. Do you guys have collars around here?"

Her brows raise curiously. "Depends. What kind of collars are you looking for, sir?"

"Shock collars."

"Hey, Dazai. So apparently, there's nothing wrong with the radio. I mean, Dostoevsky said as much a thousand times already, but you of all people would probably agree to be safe than sorry, right? Anyways, I still have hope that you'll someday get pissed off enough to at least come back and try to take the boss title from me. I doubt you'd like the job, but I'd understand if you wanted it anyway. Or maybe you'll come back and finish your degree. Just say the word, and I'll inform the contacts we have in the academic institutions. Or maybe… maybe you'll come back, and I won't even know. Maybe you are back already. The four of you are pretty damn strong. I wouldn't put it past you to pull off a scheme like that. And I wouldn't blame you either.

"Still, I… I really want to know that I'm not talking to a person that's —" Chuuya's mouth clamps shut. He can't say the words no matter how many times the fear crosses his mind. "It's a selfish thing to ask,

but just give me one word, damn it. One sign of life. That's it. That's all."

Ace manages to hang on for exactly three days before Chuuya receives breathless news of an armed robbery in one of their gambling shops.

Three days.

It's longer than he gave him, yet still so incredibly disappointing and sad for an executive.

The usual protocol would be to send reinforcements, maybe one of their ability users or the Black Lizard if non-ability means aren't enough. It's certainly no job for the boss. Mori rarely ventured outside to participate in battles, keeping everything running from the top floor of the black tower, the mafia's base. It was only under extraordinary circumstances when he did — not to resolve a mere break-in and hostage situation in a casino.

This is an outlier, too, though. *Ace* is, so Chuuya doesn't give any orders to send reinforcements. He just tells his secretary he'll take care of it himself, and that's it.

"Want me to come?" Yosano asks when he pockets his phone and gets up from one of the empty beds in the infirmary that he uses as his lunch spot these days.

"No need," he tosses the stupid scarf around his neck, fussing with it. It's a beautiful accessory, he can admit that, but it gets in the way sometimes, so he chooses not to wear it whenever he is with the people closest to him. "I know exactly what I'm going to do." He takes a look around the sick bay then. "Be on standby, though. I have a feeling you'll have new patients soon."

Yosano's smirk is razor-sharp when she gives him a two-fingered salute. "Got it, boss."

"Don't call me that," Chuuya mutters as he heads towards the exit. She might be working here now, but that doesn't mean he's her boss. It's just convenient.

He only hears laughter in place of a reply.

Karma is pretty sure today is going to be the day he dies.

Granted, that thought has crossed his mind every day for the last seven years already. It crossed his mind that one time his hands shook too much, and the bottles on the tray fell over, shattering and spilling all over the floor in front of the master's feet. It crossed his mind when he was too sick and feverish to get out of bed and take care of his duties. It crossed his mind the very day the collar appeared on his neck. It's not a rare thought when his master has strict rules and unforgiving expectations of each of his people. Sometimes the thought of it, *of dying*, makes Karma close his eyes and think *finally.* Other times, it makes him tremble with fear because it's not fair. It's not fair to die so soon. It's not fair to die before reaching any of his goals. It's not fair to die without having ever really lived.

But right now, Karma thinks that the day has finally come when the thought of dying turns into reality. Because there is a gun pressed to his temple, and if the robbers won't kill him, then his master will since this whole disaster is *his* fault.

It was Karma who was responsible for patting down visitors of *the Dragon's Den*, a mafia casino. It was Karma who nodded off on his feet for several seconds and didn't do his job correctly. It was Karma who let the robbers inside before they took out their guns and started shooting.

It's Karma's fault. All of it.

Whether it will be a headshot or being turned into a shiny jewel, he will die today, and he is not sure how he feels about that.

He doesn't think he is ready.

He *isn't* ready. For any of it.

"Oi, Gunner," one of the masked men holding Karma's comrade at gunpoint yells, "how long do you wanna make us wait?! We're on a schedule!"

"SHUT UP! These safes are a bitch to crack!"

Karma locks eyes with the girl next to him. Ace calls her Ruby, but she told Karma that she remembers her parents calling her Ayumi before she was snatched away. He sees the same fear reflected in her eyes.

Not ready.

Swallowing, Karma glances at the man behind him. Maybe he can

try… to do something. At least, he would die fighting for his life instead of dying the same way he spent his entire life: collared and trapped. He's always trapped. He —

The crash from above cuts off any coherent thought in his head as the room explodes into loud chaos.

"We fucking told you no reinforcements," Karma hears someone yell as an arm wraps around his neck, pulling him off the floor. "We fucking warned you, didn't we?!"

Before Karma dies, he only sees flying dust and rubble and bullets flying and glass shattering as something lands in the middle of it all — no, not something. Someone.

Before Karma dies, he only hears, "*SHOOT, DAMN IT!"*

Then Karma squeezes his eyes shut and sends out one final desperate prayer to a God above to at least grant him the mercy of a painless death.

And —

The pain never comes.

Karma blinks his eyes open. *It worked?*

No, he just never died.

The robber that was about to kill him is lying on what once used to be the floor and groaning in pain as the red glow of an ability keeps him pinned to the ground of the small crater. Karma's head whips around and sees some of the dust clear to reveal the silhouette of a man, tall from the way he is standing, hair… the same shade as his own but ten times more beautiful and bright in the high ponytail, a fluttering black coat on his shoulders, and the infamous red scarf Karma has heard whispers about.

He has never actually seen him, *the boss*, but Karma certainly heard rumors, and he certainly heard all the things his master had to say about him. The boss is an enemy in disguise, a scam, a coward — that he is weak. But right now he doesn't look like any of these things. Instead he looks like the person who just saved his life. All of their lives.

Suddenly, the door of the vault bursts open, and the man that had

gone inside earlier bursts out with a gun directly aimed at the boss head, letting out a sharp cry. He fires it. Karma almost watches the bullet fly in slow-motion before it just —

It bounces off the boss and flies back into the direction it came from, piercing the robber's chest before he can even realize that he's about to die.

The boss clicks his tongue, patting dust off his chest. "Where the hell is Ace?"

All Karma does is stare. A minute ago, he was 100% sure he would die, and now —

Now —

"You," the boss says with a nod directed at… Karma?! To his horror, he even walks towards him, and…. he helps him get to his feet with a hand around his arm. "Where's your superior?"

"The master — uh, the master had locked himself in his office when the shooting, um, when it started," he stammers out. As soon as the words leave his mouth, though, his hands fly to the collar around his neck.

The master hates the boss, so what if —

What if by answering the question, the master will —

"Ace!" the boss shouts all of a sudden. Making his way through the wreckage that was once the casino, he doesn't even pay one second of attention to the men on the floor, the ones who had all of their lives in their hands less than a few minutes ago. It's like they're so irrelevant to him that the boss doesn't even have to look at them.

And for the first time in his life, Karma sees *power*.

Actual power.

Not the one he saw being wielded by the big, scary men stealing children off the streets and putting a price tag on them. That wasn't actual power. It was an imbalance of power. Not the one he sees every day between the master and his jewels. The one that exist because they will get killed if they don't obey. The one that you have to enforce day by day, week by week, year by year. The one you cut out of your subordinates with a knife, with fear, and with threats. And not

the power that comes from handguns and rifles either.

Karma watches the boss stride through the building with long, casual steps. He knows his power is real because the boss didn't even have to give him one single order, and already Karma would be willing to lay down his whole life for him, just to have the boss look at him again.

"Ace, get your —"

"— damn ass out here."

Chuuya has been to the Dragon's Den enough times to know exactly where to look for Ace. He's been here with co-workers during after hours, with mafia affiliates to discuss business and on his own when the nights were long and lonely and Chuuya's pockets were too full to know what to do with them. He's in front of the office in no time, hoping that Ace wasn't at least cowardly enough to run off.

"I said," he sighs, tired of this spectacle before he even kicks in the damn door with his foot, "come out."

The barrel of the gun in Ace's hand greets him.

Chuuya cocks his eyebrow. "The last person that tried to shoot me died by the same bullet. Just so you know."

Ace's eyes twitch before his arm falls, and he jerks his head towards him. "What, came to gloat? Don't bother! This is your fault, to begin with! If you hadn't —"

Chuuya's fingers twist in the collar of his shirt and drag him after him before he can finish his sentence, pushing him away when they reach the main gambling room. Ace stumbles and falls gracelessly to his hands and knees.

"So," Chuuya says, following him but with a slight kick, he also makes sure that Ace stays where he belongs, on the ground. "Who here can tell me how such a prestigious, secure casino as *the Dragon Den* managed to get invaded by a bunch of —" He casts a glance towards the men that for *the tainted sorrow* is still pinning to the ground. "— juvenile, amateur wanna-be mobsters?" He looks around, then taps Ace's side with his foot. "Ace, care to explain?"

"I have useless subordinates," Ace growls through gritted teeth, "because *you* took all the trained guards. That's what happened!!!"

Humming quietly, Chuuya looks into the round again, finds a pair of wide, terrified eyes, and zeroes in on them. “You,” he says softly. “What’s your name?”

The eyes widen even more. “R-ruby. My name is Ruby, sir B-Boss!”

“Ruby, what happened? How did the robbers get in? Just help me understand.”

Ruby opens her mouth, but as soon as she does, her eyes flicker to Ace, and it’s like an invisible wall crashes down in front of her, making her shake her head and take a few hesitant steps back, her fingers lifting to the —

This time, Chuuya takes the short route and simple steps on Ace. “For the sake of understanding what happened, your superior, Ace, is immobile right now,” he explains with a shrug. “He can’t do shit right now. Not even use his ability.”

It seems to do the trick. Ruby’s lips part, but… someone else beats her to it.

“It was me!” a young boy with short, crimson hair blurts out. “I-I was the one who let him in! I wasn’t observant enough! It was *me!”*

Chuuya directs his gaze towards him instead. “What’s your name then?”

“Karma!”

“Okay, Karma. So you say you didn’t pay enough attention. I say let’s see if that’s true.” Stalking over to one of the closest robbers, Chuuya whips out the knife he keeps with him at all times and holds it to his throat with a curious smile. “You came in here somehow, right? So what do you say? Did Karma not pay enough attention, or is he hiding the truth?”

The robber clamps his mouth shut.

The blade pushes deeper, slicing skin and —

“Okay, okay, fine! It’s not — not like he’s lying! He was sleeping, okay?! He was sleeping when we came in!”

“Sleeping?” Chuuya echoes. “I thought he was guarding the door?!”

“He was, he was, but his eyes were all closed! He looked really tired!”

“Must have been really tired to sleep on his feet,” Chuuya comments aloud before tossing the robber back to the ground and making sure he stays there too. Ace’s face is flushed with anger when Chuuya strolls back to him and squats down. “It’s pretty hard to figure out what’s going when all your subordinates are too scared to die because of those collars to talk. Take them off, would you?”

Ace clenches his jaw so hard that the veins on his neck start throbbing, shaking his head.

“Are you saying *no*?” Chuuya asks.

“I’m saying *who the fuck do you think you are coming in here and making all these demands?!* You’re just a little kid who got lucky! You’re not the real boss and these aren’t your things; they’re *my* jewels! MY belongings! My —” His little speech bleeds into a muffled groan when Chuuya slams his face into the floor.

“I am sick and tired of hearing your annoying voice,” Chuuya mutters when he yanks him back with his fingers twisted in his hair. “Release their collars.” So weak and yet still so stubborn. “*Now*.”

“Or what?” Ace looks positively deranged with the streaks of blood streaming down his face. “You’ll kill me? Then I might as well take them all with me!”

“You think you’ll get off that easy?” Chuuya pulls him up until he can place his other hand on his chest. It glows red against his pale clothes. “Have you ever wondered what it’s like to have a hand reach inside you and crush your heart?” To demonstrate, he lets it grow heavy. Heavy enough to feel like the entire weight of a car is pressing down on Ace, his chest starting to shake wildly, eyes widening in terror. “I can’t say how painful it is,” Chuuya continues, “but I imagine it hurts pretty damn much. Flesh piercing flesh until all you can feel is my fingers in your guts d—”

Suddenly, the sound of a few dozen collars snapping open and falling to the floor echoes through the room. A few dozen *kids* reach for their necks, probably trained not to believe in miracles this quickly. But this isn’t a miracle. It’s just something that should have been done a long time ago.

As the room erupts into shocked murmurs, Chuuya leans down to Ace again. “I don’t know what it’s like getting my heart dug out, but I know what it’s like to die over and over. It’s not fucking fun that I can tell you, so no, I’m not going to kill you. And I’m not just going to

exile you from the mafia either." His fingers reach into the pockets of his coat and dig out the little present he brought. It's a collar, too. It won't turn Ace into a jewel, but it will electro-shock him with a simple push of a button. "I'll let your precious jewels decide what to do with you," he finally tells Ace as he snaps the collar shut around his neck.

It seems to yank Ace out of his snotty, tear-stained haze, mouth falling open. "No, no, no, you can't do this! *Don't* do this! I'm an executive —"

But Chuuya's already walking away. He really doesn't want to listen to Ace anymore. Today has been quite enough. He's tired, and he still needs to deal with the robbers.

"He's all yours," Chuuya tells that one kid, Karma, before tossing the remote that controls the collar towards him. "Have some fun. Get some rest. Then report to me tomorrow morning."

Karma still looks star-struck when he catches the remote, but he manages a shaky nod.

As he hears the kids crowd around Ace, the scent of vengeance rising in the air, Chuuya uses *for the tainted sorrow* to dispose of the robbers. It's usually quicker, easier, and less messy than guns. And it is.

But Chuuya doesn't recall ever feeling his energy all but rush out of him after he uses his own ability. He's never had to brace himself against the wall to keep himself standing on his feet without even being injured. His fingers have never shaken so hard that it takes him several tries to call for a cab.

"Akiko, you don't have to," he protests after arriving home and letting Yosano examine him only to conclude there's nothing inherently wrong with him. It must be another side-effect. Just another difficulty to overcome. His objections are only half-hearted because the hand on his cheek feels good. He misses being touched like that. Misses feeling good in his body. Confident. Desirable. "It's not as bad as it was back then." Similar in the way his bones are starting to ache, but he can still walk and move and wash himself.

"Did I ever say that you need it?" Yosano rubs the sponge gently over his face. It comes away with specks of blood and dirt. "All I'm offering is a helping hand."

“You’ve been helping me for the last two months.” Actually, even longer. She helped when Dazai first appeared. She helped before that, every time Chuuya found someone he couldn’t save and couldn’t bring himself to watch them die.

“Gods, you and all those receipts. Suck it up and accept it, or tell me to fuck off, but don’t sit around feeling guilty.”

Chuuya closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before exhaling. She is right. It’s not that deep. He doesn’t know when he picked up the habit of digging again. Kouyou tried so hard to make him shake it off.

For the next few minutes, he lets Yosano clean up his face and neck. He only really stirs when she starts unbuttoning his red-wine button-up. Yosano already saw his body a thousand times when she had to pick up the pieces, so there is no logical reason to feel nervous about it. She knows that the aftermath of a death by corruption that he escaped by a hair does not look pretty or heroic or clean. But maybe that’s the point. Chuuya hasn’t let anyone see him either. The only who always has to look at it is him — and his thoughts have not been particularly kind lately.

But the shirt comes off. So does everything else.

And Chuuya is bare. In the truest sense of the word. Yosano is a doctor; she is neither new to nudity nor scarring, but the way she treats him is not clinical either. Everything she does is gentle, warm, with an edge of razor-sharp control.

“You know what you need after tonight?” she asks once he’s in the tub, his head feeling like it weighs a ton.

Eyes closed in warm bliss, Chuuya only hums. He can’t bother to put thoughts together right now.

“To relax. Let go a little. Have fun.”

“Ah,” he nods in approval, “you mean wine.”

Yes, he would like to get drunk.

A feather-light fingertip traces over the slope of his neck. He feels goosebumps appear in its wake. “Mmm, but not too much. We wouldn’t want you hammered.”

“But that is how I relax these days…” .

“Oh, honey. You know exactly this isn’t the only way to relax.”

Chuuya lets one eye drift open to raise his brows.

Yosano’s smile is molten gold. “I know you miss, Dazai. I miss Sakunosuke, too. But in the meantime… why not have a little fun?”

As if on cue, the door swings open, and Dostoevsky walks in, carrying a tray with grapes, strawberries, and other fruit. Usually, he either wears suits or long, thick comfortable sweaters and pants around the house, so the sight of him in nothing but a silky violet robe and the sliver of lace peeking out from underneath makes his eyes narrow warily.

“Just so we’re clear,” Chuuya says, “you guys want to fuck me?”

“That’s exactly what we want,” Yosano confirms quickly, stealing a grape from the trape.

Dostoevsky smirks shamelessly. “Akiko wants to fuck you. I want you to fuck me. It amounts to the same thing: you in our bed.”

Unimpressed, Chuuya accepts a strawberry as well. “It’s my bed, actually.”

“Is that a yes?” Dostoevsky asks, one of his hands drifting over Yosano’s arm. For something so innocent, it looks pretty damn dirty.

As Chuuya said before, he misses being touched. And god knows when the person that he wants to do it will return. God knows whether he will want Chuuya after all that has happened. God knows whether he will even come back. Right now, the chances are slim.

Chuuya savors the refreshingly sweet in his mouth and exhales. “Yeah.”

The following day, after waking up next to two warm bodies, bones aching more than usually but working nonethless, Chuuya receives the notification that a young boy named Karma has been asking around to see him. In hindsight, telling a grunt to come up wasn’t the brightest idea considering it’s the boss that calls for you, not the other way around. One has to show a dozen cards and IDs to even be allowed on the top floor. Chuuya’s still getting used to it, though.

Chuuya is surprised that Karma isn’t alone. Ace trails after him.

Granted, he's limping, flushed and sweaty, and frankly, smelling like a dirty back-alley, but despite it all, it's Ace.

"You let him live," Chuuya says. "I wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't."

Karma's hands curl by his sides, but it's not anger that's on his face. Not really. "We wanted to. We really did. But then we realize that the decision isn't ours to make. You were the one who freed us. You should be the one who gets to decide what to do with the ma— with Ace."

Behind him, there is a muffled sound.

But Chuuya ignores Ace. "I'll find some use for him. What about you?"

Karma looks up.

"I know you never joined the port mafia voluntarily," Chuuya says. "So if you want to leave now, that's your choice. You can." *And you probably should.*

"What if we don't?" Karma asks.

"Then I'll find a use for you, too."

"I —" Karma lets out a long, stuttered breath. "I wanted to be free for so long that I never even considered what to do if it actually happened. I don't think I have a family out there waiting for me. I don't think I ever had. I'm… nothing. And if you will have me, have us, then we would be really thankful to you." Before Chuuya can answer, Karma suddenly drops down on one knee, bowing his head before him. "I will dedicate my blood and all that I am to you, boss. I will work to support, protect this organization, and to decimate your enemies. *Our* enemies will know the vicious gravity that will crush those who oppose the port mafia."

Chuuya can't help but breathe out a soundless laugh at the memory of another boy dropping to his knees, just as young, just as foolishly brave and ready to get his hands dirty just to feel like he belongs somewhere. Is this how it goes, then? Just another cycle that he's continuing here?

He swallows before saying, "welcome to the port mafia, Karma." Karma's head lifts to look at him, so fucking eager to hear the words that Chuuya feels like he is looking at a mirror that shows him the

past and the future at the same time. “Give your fellow companion the same choice. If they choose to stay, they’re starting today.”

“How long has it been? 84 days. If you’re wondering what I did about the assassination attempts: I took care of it. No one tried to kill me in fifteen days and, trust me, that’s a record. So it’s been fine. It’s been surprisingly okay lately.

“I wonder how long it will stay that way.”

“Akiko warned me that things would be different now, that my body wouldn’t be the same anymore, but I didn’t think it would affect *for the tainted sorrow.* Every time I use it, I — it’s like I’m not using my ability but my damn life energy, and apparently, it’s very limited. I don’t really know what to do about it either except try to take it easy, but I’m not like Mori. I don’t want to sit around all day. I hired assistants for that. I still go out, and I do the things I used to do because I know my ability will protect me if someone tries to kill me but…. but at the end of the day, I feel physically drained. I got used to the pain, you know. I can take that. But I can’t get used to being powerless. It sucks. Even talking exhausts me because I had to use *for the tainted sorrow* last night. Can you believe that? It’s just talking. What about that is hard?

But don’t worry. I’ll still talk to you, Dazai. No matter how tired I get.”

“I feel like a dog chasing after my own tail, but I have to know. I have to know whether you’re somewhere out there or whether I should… buy flowers and dig a grave, I don’t fucking know. So I will keep looking no matter how many people tell me that the radio is perfectly fine. I will find you.”

“Day 130. I’ve been looking for the right person to hire for a while now, and, to be honest, it’s been a shitty search so far. None of the detectives I’ve been talking to are outstanding. Only mediocre. I need someone really good. Someone brilliant. Someone like you.

“I also need someone I can trust. One wrong move and half of Yokohama will know that I’m searching for you. I can’t have that.

“Next week, I’m meeting another two. I know you don’t want to find me, but wish me luck anyway, huh? Just for old times sake.”

“Akiko recommended talking to some guy called Ranpo Edogawa. Apparently, he’s the real deal. That’s what the last ten people pretended to be, too, though, so I’m going in with low expectations.”

“Hey, Osamu. It’s been 153 days. I just want to say that... I understand. I do.”

YOKOHAMA, TWO DAYS AGO:

“I must say I’m rather surprised you requested this meeting. I was under the assumption you only associate with the port mafia when something is burning, Taneda. I don’t see anything aflame right now.”

Santouka Taneda, the leader of the Special Division for Unusual Powers, bald and wearing a rather funny expression on his face, curls his fingers around his cup of sake. “Not yet, but it’s only a matter of time.”

Chuuya leans back in his chair, one arm casually thrown across the back of it. It’s one of the last sunny days here before a ruthless winter completely takes over the city, but because they’re on a boat out on the sea, the wind has a cruel bite to it. For once, Chuuya is glad for the scarf around his neck. It’s keeping him warm and cozy. “Wow, really? I’m dying to hear.”

Of course, he already knows what this will be about — Fyodor, Yosano, and he came to the same conclusion when this meeting was arranged. The only thing that Chuuya is curious to hear is what cards exactly Taneda is holding because there is no way he came empty-handed, not when he is about to propose an exchange this daring.

“Have you ever heard of the book?”

“Only a few dozen times,” Chuuya replies with a shrug. That name fell a few times here and there even before the guild came looking for it, but just like abilities, it’s shrouded in a mist of lore and mystery; no one who talks about it is actually sure whether it’s real or a fairy tale. Personally, he hates that thing. Too bad the mafia — or rather a former member, no matter how brief his employment was — is directly linked to it.

“Then you know how much death and destruction occurs when someone intends to get their hands on it,” Taneda says ominously.

“The guild was defeated —” *The port mafia* did that, thank you very much. “— but the search for the book continues, and because of them — the guild, I mean, it’s louder than ever. Soon this city will be crawling with certain people and organizations trying to find it. It will resemble the war against the guild, except that it’s going to be a hundred times worse. And it will never stop.”

Chuuya cocks his head. “So let me guess: you want to find it first.”

Taneda doesn’t seem surprised by the correct assumption, and it bums Chuuya out. Not because it changes anything, but because he has gotten so used to outsiders only seeing him as this dumb, loud executive who apparently can’t do anything but throw fists, so that it’s not fun anymore when they already know there’s a bit more to him than just anger issues and a one-track mind.

“We want to secure it and seal it away for good,” he confirms. “So this city can finally take a rest and flourish just like it was always meant to be.”

“I’m sure that’s what everyone says who is looking for the thing,” Chuuya says dryly.

Taneda readjusts his glasses. “Protecting this country and its citizens is what we swore to do. The book is no different.”

“Tell that to the hundreds of people who died when you let out Shibusawa.”

“Tatsuhiko Shibusawa was a tactile mistake, you’re right, and we don’t intend to repeat it ever again. But the things coming for the book will be much worse than the dragon. Trust me.”

Spoken like every boring villain in disguise ever, Chuuya thinks before flicking his fingers and leaning forward with one elbow on the table. He’s sick of talking around it. He wants to know what it is that they have. “That sounds like a lot of work, Taneda. I’m still waiting to hear why you think the port mafia would assist you in this wild goose chase.”

“Aside from the fact that the port mafia will always be the first stop on the way to the book?”

“The tiger-boy isn’t with us anymore.” It’s not new information. Indeed, there have been people looking for him, but all they ever found was his traceless disappearance nine months ago. Word has

spread ever since. “We have nothing to do with the book.”

“Are you sure?” Taneda asks. Something in his voice makes Chuuya’s eye twitch in irritation. “The weretiger might not be here, but he is with that other boy. What was his name? Dazai Osamu?” Chuuya represses the urge to curl his hands into fists. “And from what I can tell, Dazai Osamu has everything to do with you, Nakahara-san.”

He’s not quite sure whether the ringing in his ear is the noise of waves falling over and over around them, or whether it’s his mind imploding quietly.

Shoulders pulling back, Chuuya forces himself to focus. Just for a few more minutes. “So you know about Dazai,” he says, “congratulations. That doesn’t change the fact that both of these people are on the other side of the world right now.”

“Actually,” Taneda replies, reaching down. The movement makes Chuuya’s men behind him reach for their guns, but both Taneda and Chuuya signal that it’s fine with a nod. It’s an envelope that lands on the table. “Open it.” As Chuuya’s fingers reach for it, Taneda says, “not quite that far. Only 850 kilometers, to be exact.”

At the same time, Chuuya pulls out several colorized photographs taken from afar, clearly depicting Dazai and the other three men who are with him.

Dazai in denim overall, wearing a straw hat and carrying a bucket.

Dazai talking to Oda.

Dazai and the three men around a table, eating and laughing.

Letting out a bitter snort, Chuuya lifts his gaze. “Blackmail, huh? So much about you being the good guys.”

“Not blackmail,” Taneda waggles his finger back-and-forth, “exchange of means. You’ve been looking for Dazai Osamu; we know where he — and the weretiger — are. We want to find the book. You can work with us together to protect the city.”

Except he got one thing wrong.

Chuuya doesn’t need this bald sack of potatoes to tell him Dazai’s location. He has known that for five months already. He just hoped that he would remain the only one possessing this bit of information.

Because now that they know and aren't above using it to coerce the port mafia into working with them, everything amounts to the same thing.

Chuuya will have to contact them — contact Dazai. Whether he wants to or not.

YOKOHAMA, 1 DAY AGO:

For the first time in nine months, Chuuya waits for someone on the end of the line to answer and knows that they will. Because this isn't the radio. This is the damn landline of the animal rescue farm where Dazai and the rest of the group have been hiding out all the time. When one of the owners picked up, Chuuya said his name was Gin and that he needs to speak to the dark-haired, broody young man with an awful haircut just in case they aren't using their real names. The woman on the line immediately knew he was talking about Akutagawa.

So now it's just a matter of waiting, only that this time it has a purpose.

Chuuya stares at his ceiling as he does, counting tiles instead of paying attention to thundering, pulsating th—

"Who is this?"

His head snaps up. "Akutagawa, it's me. Chuuya. And don't you fucking dare hang up on me, or I'll —"

"What? Is Gin okay?"

"Gin's peachy. I gave them a raise."

"Oh. So you're — you're the boss now. Congratulations."

"Listen, there is a reason why I had to reach out like this. The Special Division for Unusual Powers knows where you are, so the cover's blown. You're in danger."

"What do they care?"

"They have their reasons. Just get your asses back here…." And then he pauses. Isn't he making the same decision that he did nine months ago? The same one that made Dazai not speak to him for nine months? "You could probably take them on by yourself as well. As far

as I know, they only have one man over there. I guess I could send reinforcements if you guys want to stay. Or go somewhere else."

"Chuuya — I mean *boss*, give us a day. We'll be there."

Oh.

"A day," Chuuya confirms, hands sweaty from clutching his phone so hard. "Then hurry. And be careful, okay? I have a feeling they're going to play dirty."

"Yes. We'll get moving right away." The line goes dead without any more comments. Akutagawa has never been a man of many words.

One day.

Out of 271… what's one more?

Chapter End Notes

The next update will bring: a goodbye, a fight, and a hello :D

Chapter 17: Red, Blue, and Black

Chapter Notes

> Hellooo, today I bring you a chapter that we all have been waiting for? Hopefully? Well, I definitely did because it has one of these key moments that I came up with when I first started thinking about this fic. THAT'S ALL I HAVE TO SAY THOUGH. Bye and enjoy <3
>
> Warnings: mention of suicide, death of irrelevant background characters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a pretty quiet dinner with only Oda to keep him company — Akutagawa is too rude and too impatient to join them and Atsushi too insistent on being a supportive boyfriend or whatever, Dazai finds himself sitting on the porch in the backyard, watching the sun go down once again. His fingers busy themselves ripping off grass over and over. Like he is some mighty earth god that has decided it's over for these sprouts just because he is having a bad day. It still somehow makes more sense than most things in this world.

In the bleak reality, he is waiting for Odasaku to come and convince him to stop stalling and get in the car. Because he will. He knows that already. Dazai just doesn't understand why it has to be this way again. Why it couldn't have been *their* choice to go back instead of the uncalled for, bossy *I've decided to end your exile, now get your ass back to Yokohama* way that is happening here all over again.

The sound of the door sliding open comes almost ten minutes later. Dazai only glances over his shoulder to make sure it's the right person before asking, "Odasaku, why are you so willing to go back? I would have thought that you, of all people, would want to say. You said it's peaceful here. That it's *good*."

"I still think it is," Oda says as he sits down next to him, bracing two hands behind himself and tilting his chin up to get a maximum dose of evening sun light. "It's a very good place, and it's been a very peaceful nine months."

"So why leave?"

"Why stop eating even though it tastes good?"

Dazai puffs out an annoyed laugh.

“Okay, maybe that’s the wrong example in your case,” Oda admits and considers his words for a few moments. “Why not read your favorite book over and over? Why bother trying out new books when you already have something that you know and that you like?”

“Okay, Socrates, I get it,” Dazai mumbles with his knees pulled up so he can rest his chin on them. His head feels so painfully heavy today. “Once you reread a book too many times, no matter how much you love it, it will get boring.”

“Actually,” Oda clears his throat, sounding amused, “I was going to say that you might find another book that you like. Maybe even more than the other one. And then you’ll have two favorite books. More things to enjoy.”

“Oh.” Sighing, Dazai shakes his head. “I won’t like the next book, though. I’ll hate it. So why bother reading it?” And then because it feels like a scab that won’t stop itching unless he actually scratches it, “let’s stop with the analogies and say it how it is: I don’t want to see Chuuya again! I thought I did because I didn’t even know whether he was still alive, but now that I know, I’m happy to continue living my life pretending I don’t know him. And I *don’t* want to go back to Yokohama just because he told me to. It’s humiliating.”

Oda lets out a weary sigh. “Going back doesn’t mean you have to see him. Or forgive him.”

“Good,” Dazai juts out his nose, “because I won’t! I refuse to!”

“Just… don’t forget that you managed to forgive me too.”

“That’s because *you* didn’t give the order.”

“I only executed it,” Oda murmurs. “In the end, it’s the same thing. All four of us took something that wasn’t ours to take.”

Feeling restless, Dazai starts plucking grass again. “But you were here, and you were sorry, and you didn’t make me wait nine months to know you’re alive. You *know* you were wrong. Considering how Chuuya suddenly decided we should get back the same way he decided we should suddenly leave, I doubt he does. He probably still thinks it was right.”

“Well, I don’t know what happened, but Akutagawa said it’s urgent.

That —”

“I don’t care,” Dazai decides once and for all and gets to his feet. “I’m only going back to read a new book. But it’s not going to be one with him inside.”

The patch of earth under him is all brown and empty because of his earlier ministrations, just like the hole inside him, that was healing into something pretty and green before today. That’s the annoying thing about getting better: you can spend months stitching yourself back together, yet it takes seconds for someone else to pluck them out and trample all over you again.

Mere seconds.

There is just one last thing to do before Dazai gets into the car that will take him back to Yokohama. (Home, but not really. Not anymore.)

When he peeks into the courtyard of Emily’s own little lodge, Emily is on the porch swing, squinting at a notebook in her lap. Luna rests on the ground, but she jumps up to greet Dazai as soon as she sees him.

Don’t get him wrong, if Dazai can avoid it, he will give the dogs here a wide berth. But this one has somehow successfully girl-bossed and manipulated herself into his heart, so he even lets her slobber all over his hand as he squats down in front of her.

“The others already told me you were leaving,” he hears Emily say above him. “Are you excited to go back?”

“Excited isn’t quite the word I’d use,” Dazai replies soberly. “I got used to the farm life, you know.” But every time, he gets used to something, it gets ripped away.

“Well, you can always come back, right?”

World darkening and spinning with his fluttering lashes, Dazai finally lifts his gaze. Why not? Who is there to stop him from going back after… let’s say, after he actually graduates. The Miyazawas always need helpers out there. And the offer for either the lost ones or the ones trying to flee doesn’t have an expiration date either as far as he is aware.

So what if he is forever lost? He can always return. Just like he can

always go back and reread his favorite book.

“Yeah. I can always come back. You’re right.”

“When I first came here for the summer, I thought it was only a one-time thing until I found a better job in the city, one where I don’t have to live without any internet for months but…” They shrug, making a face. “You do get used to it, don’t you? I’ll probably still come even years after I graduate. Even when I won’t need the money.”

Dazai smiles to himself as he spoils Luna with belly rubs — his parting gift to her. “Maybe we will all meet here again. You will come back for a vacation. Odasaku will come back to write his tenth novel. I will come back to... reread my favorite book.” He likes the idea.

“Akutagawa and Atsushi will spend their honey moon here,” Emily jokes.

“And we will all discuss our fantasy stick ball books again.”

“Maybe someone will finally give Seth a chance.”

“Eh, let’s not go overboard.”

He is laughing, though, so is Emily, and for a few more minutes, the world remains a touch softer than it actually is.

—

Okay, so Dazai lied. *This* is the last stop. Really.

“I just want you to know,” he says, nodding his head, “that even though you were trying to eat me half of the time we spent together and even though you preferred grass over listening to me… you were still the best cow that I have ever met. You are the only one for me, Belinda.”

Belinda seems kind of tired today, just letting Dazai rub her neck as she swings her tail this way and that.

“Don’t forget me,” Dazai threatens as he takes a calculated risk and wraps his arms around her. She doesn’t even smell bad…. well, not *that* bad. Only a little. The kind of bad that is bearable. “Or I won’t bring you special snacks the next time I see you.”

Because he will see her again. And he will come back. Someday, when

he feels like revisiting something warm and comforting. Someday, when he needs a place to feel the sun on his face again.

After the car starts, Dazai rests his head back against the seat and closes his eyes.

When he wakes up, the countryside is long left behind.

"So, how are we even feeling?"

Fussing with the crinkled collar of his button-up shirt, bleeding the same shade of red as the scarf, Chuuya grunts out a breath. "Annoyed. Those special division fuckers are seriously pissing me off making threats like that. Who do they think they are, huh? And all for that damn book? Like it hasn't created enough of a mess already."

"I meant how do we feel about the return of our friends, but yes, tell me about it," Yosano says as she comes to stand in front of him, gently slapping his over-agitated fingers away so she can flatten out the collar herself, pat any particles of dust away. "I've always known those government twerps are not as holy as they pretend to be."

That's an understatement. Sure, this is the port mafia, but at least they never pretended to be good to sleep better at night. At least, they're honest about what they're made of instead of covering up underground military laboratories that experiment on human beings without their consent or letting uncontrollable ability users loose like the white dragon with the excuse of 'saving the city'.

"They're a load of shit covered in glitter," Chuuya mutters in reply.

"But seriously." Yosano catches his gaze and raises her brows. "How are we feeling?"

"How am I supposed to feel? Yeah, they're coming back, but he probably hates me anyway, so all I can really think about right now is making sure that the others don't get to them first. That's it." Everything else is… not really up to him anymore. Chuuya can beg, he can grovel, he can try to make up for the shit he pulled, but it won't change the last nine months. "How do *you* feel?"

Because Chuuya wasn't the only one who hoped to hear someone's voice on the other end of the radio all this time.

Yosano presses out a faint, small smile, so very striking compared to the usual expression on her face, and yet Chuuya knows it all too well by now. He has seen it time and time again. “I feel like I’ve been thinking of someone I barely even know all this time. I mean, what is a little over one month compared to nine?”

Yeah. That too.

“You have all the time in the world to make up for it now,” he points out.

She makes a face. “So do you, darling. Don’t give up hope just yet.”

It’s not only about giving up hope because giving up by principle is not in his nature. It’s about giving Dazai back the thing he stole from him when he knocked him out and packed him into a car on that day. It’s about giving Dazai the choice to forgive him or not and accepting it without any *but*s.

“Maybe, but that’s not my call to make.” With a sigh, he drags his feet to his desk and collapses in his chair, feeling the nauseating mist of dizziness invade his head. “They should be here around six o’clock in the evening, according to Akutagawa. Taneda’s men will be waiting.”

And the port mafia will be waiting for *them.*

“Arresting Akutagawa-kun and his ‘accomplices’ the moment they step into the city,” Yosano says in a chiding tone. “That’s one way to say *welcome home.”*

“It’s one way to say *work with us or else*,” Chuuya mutters, scrubbing a hand across his face.

Because Chuuya knew they wouldn’t drop the matter quietly when he told them to eat shit, not after making such an effort to locate Dazai’s location and especially not when that means they get to get their greasy hands on Atsushi as well. Killing him would be useless, but arresting him along with Akutagawa for the crimes they’ve committed in the mafia and have Dazai and Oda pegged as their accomplices? That is sure to give Chuuya an incentive to work with them.

Yosano plants her ass on his desk and taps her mahogany-colored nails against the surface in a rhythm that matches his heartbeat. “Well, the team will be on standby the entire day. Just say the word.”

“Our inside man as well. As soon as they’re moving, we’ll know.”

“Good.”

“Yeah,” Chuuya echoes. His throat feels dry. “Good.”

It feels surreal to even talk about this. After so many months, weeks, days of imagining his friends coming back, of *Dazai* coming back, knowing that it is actually happening this time doesn’t really register. It’s like hearing that a comet is about to split the earth in two and laughing it off because things that big and terrifying are too otherwordly to process right away. Because people in this life usually don’t return.

They die. They leave. They disappear. But they don’t come back.

Until they do, and suddenly Chuuya is sitting in his office, listening to the steady rap of nails echoing through the room and trying to decipher whether it’s a good thing or not.

“Did you talk to Fyodor?” he asks when he doesn’t find an answer.

Yosano’s back slumps ever so slightly as she exhales. “Yes, he’ll probably be back next week. Said he wouldn’t want to miss the reunion dinner.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “Why does he even assume he’ll be invited? He wasn’t part —” Of what exactly, he doesn’t know. Their group? Seems a bit shallow, if you ask him. Their friendship? Maybe. Their little family? Probably too big of a word considering what they are now, but for at least a few weeks, it did feel like that. “— of us,” he finishes.

“Well, he spent a considerable amount of time with Sakunosuke and me,” she drawls and turns around with a feline smirk on her lips.

“I’ll never understand what the hell happened between the three of you,” Chuuya mutters. “How’d you even find the time to fuck that day? Seriously.” He probably isn’t the best person to judge what with the many occasions *he* found himself in bed with the two people in question, but whenever he did, it went without saying that it was only a way to release stress. It was only for fun. Pleasure. Pain relief. But that’s it. It doesn’t compare to the look in Yosano’s eyes when she talks about Oda, and it certainly doesn’t compare to the craters that Dazai left inside Chuuya.

“Who says we did?”

“Oh, so a bit of wordplay has both of you lusting after Oda?”

“Who knows. In any case, Fyodor has obviously known Dazai for a while as well, so.” She shrugs. “We all know each other. We’ve just never been in the same room together for more than five minutes. It will be pretty interesting.”

“It will either be a massacre,” Chuuya corrects dryly, “or not happen at all.”

The noise of footsteps echoing through the office saves him from hearing another version of *he’ll come around eventually,* but not from a wink and a, “we’ll see about that” before Yosano hops off the desk to casually lean against it instead as two of his guards walk in. Trailing behind them are Kouyou and three of her best girls, cheeks so rosy, and smiles so divine you won’t ever see them coming until it’s too late and your throat is being split open. Once upon a time, Chuuya used to offer the port mafia’s enemies identical grins.

“Boss. Yosano-san,” Kouyou greets them with a bow of her head. “We have news of the Mohito clan.”

The Mohito clan has been trying to steal their customer base for a few weeks now, without any success far, but it’s been a chess match for a few months now because they’ve got someone with a strategic ability on their side. Unfortunately for them, the same person also has a weakness for girls who look like angels and fuck like devils.

“Let me guess,” Chuuya drawls, stretching his arms over his head with a sigh. “They plan to go for the Rokuro brothers next.”

One of the girls, Shion, chuckles. “Of course, they will, boss. Everyone wants the Rokuro brothers.”

Kouyou shushes her with a single glance before giving him a nod.

Well, this is going to be a long day. As always.

“Let’s hear it then.”

The good thing about this entire ordeal — and let’s be honest, there aren’t many — is that once they reach modern civilization, Oda buys him a new phone when Dazai insists they make a stop at a shopping mall. Since Dazai woke up without his own phone on that wonderful day nine months ago, he doesn’t even feel bad for making Oda spend so much money on his shiny, big, new toy.

The second good thing is that having a new phone means also having access to the *internet.* Truth be told, he enjoyed his time without it. There is something peaceful about living your life without that wretched invention: no everyday news about something horrible that happened on the other side of the world, no happy people that he has to scroll past on social media, no websites that tell you you're going to die when you google your symptoms, no *nothing.*

But all good things come to an end, right? And the internet is one of those normalized addictions that everyone indulges in anyway. Dazai is no different, so as soon as his phone is charged, turned on, and has a sim card inside, he is on it as quick as the local crack whore.

Oda sends amused glances his way every now and then as he steers them towards the highway. "So, what are you going to do first now that you're back?" he asks. "Text your friends? I do wonder whether someone reported you missing… Or me…*"*

"Don't be silly, Odasaku," Dazai says, tapping away on the phone. "I have no friends. Well, except you. Maybe Atsushi if he feels generous. No, I'm trying to log into my student account and see whether they have kicked me out yet."

"Shit. I haven't even thought about that. You know, I could talk to —"

"Nope."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Something stupid, I'm sure. But no worries, Odasaku. Apparently, I'm still…. enrolled. Just on a break semester." A huffy breath whooshes out of his nostrils. "That I *never* applied for."

He feels Oda look at him again but not say anything before turning his gaze back on the road.

So Dazai was right back then. That…. little patronizing, lying bastard of a redhead even meddled in *this.* (And no, Dazai was *not* already sighing dramatically at the thought of somehow trying to get back into his program if this hadn't been the case. He's not relieved. Not at all.)

"That's good, right?" Odasaku tries. "You can continue without any disadvantages?"

Growing more irritated by the minute as he looks at his phone, Dazai

locks it and gazes out of the window instead. “Once the semester starts, yes. But where am I going to live now?”

“I’m sure if your enrollment is taken care of, then your room in the dorm should be as well.”

“What if I move in with you?” Dazai suggests, turning back to his friend. “Where *did* you live before… you became my bodyguard?”

Oda grimaces softly. “A one-bedroom apartment above a convenience store. There was barely any space for me, Dazai. I doubt we could fit two of us in there.”

“Hah,” leaning back, Dazai waves his hand through the air. “We can get ourselves something new. Something bigger. Don’t tell me you haven’t been sitting on a heap of mafia money ever since we left.” Scarce in goodbyes Chuuya might be, but he was nothing short of annoyingly generous. When they left the farm, Oda left a significant donation because the family wouldn’t accept rent from then as they technically worked for their stay. Even without that, though, Dazai somehow doubts that Chuuya would just send him off without the necessary funding. Stupid, rich prick that he is.

“I planned to give most of it back,” Odasaku says. Of course, he would.

“You were forced to pack and leave for nine months without any warning. The least you deserve is to become rich for putting up with that.”

“Hm, well, to be honest, my salary as your bodyguard has already been more than enough, so… I don’t really need it?” See, *generous.* “It’s money for you anyway, so if you want it, you can have it.”

“Maybe I should,” he muses out loud. “I could take it and then move to another city to finish my degree. Or, I could hire an assassin and take out the new mighty boss of the port mafia.” The words all but spit out. “Neh, I’d rather do that myself. What are *you* going to do, Odasaku? Are you going to publish your book?”

“I’ll have to find someone first who even wants to publish me. But eventually, yes. I’d like that. For now, I’ll just try to settle back in. Get back into the groove of things.”

The answer is vague, and yet it’s glaringly obvious that what he will do is go *back.* Back to his life that he led nine months ago. Back to the

person, he was. Back to the people that stayed in Yokohama.

But Dazai… he can't just go back. Not to Chuuya. Not to live with him. Not to whatever relationship might have come out of the two of them before everything fell apart so horribly.

And yet, he doesn't want to go back to life before Chuuya either. Just him and his books alone in the dorm. Occasionally deciding to show up to class. Never talking to anyone. Always just observing. Studying the life and people around him so meticulously without ever really participating.

Dazai could go back, sure, revert back to his old ways and spend another few years doing nothing before finally putting an end to it all, but somehow he doesn't want to.

He wants *more.* And after so many years of being convinced there isn't anything in this world that could fill the void inside him, realizing that he was wrong, that there are things that could — not fill him entirely, never that, but give him enough substance to at least know what it's like to be a living human being — is a terrifying conclusion because wanting something also means that you can, and you probably will lose it. And that… well, that his skin is somewhat too fragile to bear.

And so the choice here really lies between… feeling nothing or feeling everything so deeply that it will crush him like a glass figurine. It's not a choice. It's a gun that honks when you pull the trigger. It's a joke.

"You'll go see all of them," Dazai murmurs, "won't you?"

When the car comes to a padded stop at a red light, Odasaku meets his gaze, his smile already confirmation enough. "I'd like that, yes."

So will Atsushi. And Dazai doesn't even have to wonder about Akutagawa. The guy was all but bouncing to get into the car and go back. What a loser.

Dazai swallows around a lump in his throat. "And me? Are you still going to see me now and then?"

Oda blinks. The light turns green. The engine purrs, the car moves forward, but Dazai feels like he is falling, falling, falling deep into an abyss that he thought he wouldn't have to see again.

"Of course, I will, Dazai. Every day."

A hand grabbing his wrist stops him from reaching the bottom of that well.

It's his turn to look baffled. "Every day?".

"Well, as much as your social battery allows it," Oda relents. "But we're friends. You don't think that will change now just because we're going to be back in Yokohama, do you? Now we can at least go out to eat instead of having to cook all the time."

"Oh," Dazai says dumbly.

Friends, right. Somehow he never realized that this concept doesn't only apply in certain stages of his life. That it's something that stretches and bends on and on and on, no matter where or who, or how you are. Maybe Chuuya was never a friend. Just a part of a particular stage in his life. A prop, if you will. And now, the prop is gone, and the stage has changed its setting.

Friendship. What an odd phenomenon.

The call comes at five o'clock, just when the winter sun is starting to set across the sky.

"They're moving out in half an hour."

From then on, it's beautiful, precise chaos: car engines coming to life, weapons being loaded, systems booting, his people gearing up, and reporting to their assigned teams. Snapping on his gloves, Chuuya once again thinks about how much he prefers *this* over the waiting, the sitting and talking over things that might or might not happen, and watching the chess board move without being on the battleground himself. However, being the boss usually entails a lot of these things. He knows that Mori led the port mafia that way: neatly from the top. Sure, he slaved away for all of them, no question there, but he did it sitting on the throne and from the safety of his four impenetrable walls. For him, it worked.

Chuuya… well, he's been using a bit of a hands-on approach. Leading from the ground, as some people say, or, well, not *exactly*.

"Boss!" Karma's voice is barely audible over the noise of the roaring sound of blades spinning through the air, crimson hair whipping back and forth in the strapping gusts of wind. "Everyone is in position! We're ready for take-off!"

Chuuya waits until Karma climbs inside and straps in before sliding the side doors shut and slamming his hand against them. The engine whines around them. “All right, let’s move, people!”

For some silly reason, Dazai anticipated Yokohama to look different now. Maybe there would be a fire burning somewhere in the distance because of the new port mafia boss residing over them. Perhaps a few corpses greeting them. Perhaps the roads would be covered in blood. He knows where those pictures actually come from, although comparing someone like Chuuya to his father doesn’t make the slightest bit of sense. The only thing they have in common is abandoning him, but that’s where their similarities end.

Unlike his colorful imagination, though, Yokohama looks the same as they chase down the interstate. The towering skyscrapers and high buildings are still standing in the distance. The twinkling neon lights of Cosmo World are still reflected in the water. Everything is still so grand and cold and untouchable.

Dazai leans back against his headrest with a sigh, wanting to just close his eyes and go back to the nap that he just woke up from. As he does, however, he notices a row of sleek black cars in the rearview mirror. His gaze travels aside. Just a handful of vehicles ahead of them. Black, too. Now that he is awake and looking, all three lanes seem oddly empty considering it’s nearly six o’clock, the time when the evening rush-hour traffic usually clogs up the entire city.

“Odasaku.”

Oda doesn’t turn his eyes from the road. “I know.”

“How long have they’ve been trailing us?”

“Not long. A few minutes.” Then Oda reaches under his coat and slides out a gun, offering it to Dazai. “Take it.”

“Heh, so you weren’t happy to see me?” Dazai jokes even as his fingers wrap around the grip of the Glock. It’s been a while since he held one of these. Back when Odasaku first started working as his bodyguard, he showed him how to safely use one, and Dazai pretended to know less than he actually did. Shooting a gun is a lot like riding a bike — and he learned how to do the first way before doing the latter — you never forget it.

Oda exhales a soft breath as he checks the rearview mirror again. Yup,

their companions are still very much there. “Ring the others,” he says. “See if they’ve got company, too.”

Fishing out his one phone with one hand and tapping one of the three numbers he has saved, Dazai wrinkles his nose. He has a feeling he won’t like what’s on the other end of it.

“*Yes*,” Akutagawa’s growling voice comes from the other line as soon as he picks up, “they’ve got us surrounded as well. Probably the special division department for unusual powers guys.”

“Why?”

“Beats me. Boss just said they know where we are and that they’re probably going to try something.”

“And you only tell us that now?” Dazai asks flatly.

“Not like I didn’t try, but you literally covered your ears every time the topic came u—”

“Ryuu, you can argue later,” Dazai hears Atsushi’s muffled voice in the background. “Now’s really not the time…”

“Fine, fine. How many are ahead of you?”

“Six from what I can see,” Dazai replies, scanning the lanes. “More behind us.” He clicks his tongue then. “The special division department you said? They know about Oda’s ability then. That’s why they picked the highway for this. Harder to escape no matter if we know what’s going to happen or not.”

“Great,” Akutagawa mutters. “We should have taken the boat.”

“I get seasick. I would rather get chased off a highway than spend several hours puking.”

“Ahh, I don’t like boats either…” Atsushi mumbles.

“Dazai,” Odasaku warns and jerks his head behind them. Oh, their friends are starting to feel lonely behind them.

“Right. How far behind are you?”

“A kilometer? Two?” Akutagawa guesses.

“Okay. Suggestion: how about you split up your awesome, super-

strong abilities, and one of you takes care of your company, the other of ours?"

"How are we supposed to —"

"I'll do it," Atsushi volunteers breathlessly. "If I turn into the weretiger, I can clear the way for you both!"

"Jinko," Akutagawa hisses, "*if!* You can't control it that well yet!"

"I practiced!"

"And half the time —"

"Ye of little faith, Akutagawa-kuuun," Dazai says in a sing-song voice, hoping to annoy the guy into giving in. "Atsushi-kun works well under pressure. This is a high-pressure situation. See? Perfect."

Suddenly, sirens flare-up behind them. Dazai's head snaps back in time to hear the crackling of a megaphone.

"POLICE. YOU'RE SURROUNDED. SLOW DOWN AND SURRENDER QUIETLY."

"Chasing us in black cars isn't very police-y of them," Dazai murmurs.

"The law doesn't apply when they're dealing with ability users," Odasaku mutters next to him.

"Just so we're clear. We're not surrendering, right?" Atsushi asks.

"Jinko, we're mafia. What do you think?"

"I don't know! Just making sure!"

Dazai sighs. "I'm too pretty to go to prison, so I'd suggest the plan *weretiger saves the day* right about —"

The escalating sound of crushed metal meeting asphalt pierces the line before it cuts off. But Dazai doesn't have to rely on the phone anymore. All he has to do is look over his shoulder and see the black-clothed ability, going by the name Rashomoun, unfold like some kind of six-legged Lochness monster to see what's going.

"... now," he finishes in a breath before looking at Odasaku. "Are we in danger?"

Oda's lips press together. "Not yet."

Considering the vehicles in front of them are starting to slow down to intercept them, that's about to change very, very soon.

"POLICE. THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING TO SURRENDER QUIETLY. STOP YOUR VEHICLE *NOW*."

The breath in Dazai's lungs feels like freezing gas as it rushes through him, knowing that Atsushi simply has to pull through or —

A blinding, circular light comes from above, shining directly onto them. Dazai shields his hands to see a chopper helicopter hover a few feet in the air. His throat is dry as he swallows.

"Dazai," Oda says. "Hold tight. *Now."*

And then everything happens all at once.

Dazai grabs the roof handles. Oda swirls the steering wheel around. The car screeches as they do a dizzying 180, and they only catch a flash of Atsushi in his weretiger form bouncing off the interstate boardings and towards the pile of cars waiting for them. Not even a second later, something long and silver cuts through the the same spot that their car was just in.

"They —" Dazai almost climbs up in his seat to look at the person controlling that thing — the *sword.* Long, black hair waving in the wind as they chase Atsushi, who apparently seems to be the main target of this entire operation. "Odasaku, they've got an ability user."

But Odasaku yanks him down instead, frantically looking around them. "Stay low," he murmurs as the cars from behind not only catch up but surround them *again.* Atsushi pulled through. It's Akutagawa who didn't manage to clean up the mess in time, but what with the ability user and his weird sword — something about it makes Dazai's brain itch — that's no surprise nor his personal failure.

As they roll to a stop, an eerie silence falls over the world. That kind of static stillness only happens right before the storm hits. Even the thundering puls in Dazai's ears mellows out into some kind of nothing.

They're surrounded. But they're not surrendering. Which means....

Dazai glances at Oda, who isn't moving either. "Why aren't we in danger?"

Oda only has time to meet his gaze with the same shade of confusion in his eyes before the question seems to trigger blood.

Gunshots. So many and all at once —

"Down, down, down," Oda hisses, pulling both of them as low as possible and protecting their heads as round after round fires at their car, glass shattering.

But that sudden line of fire ends as abruptly as it began. That shockingly soft silence again. Dazai lifts his eyes to see a storm of *more* bullets rain down on them, except there is no sound, and they don't land on their car. They're just —

"I don't understand." Shaking his head, he braces himself on the seat just to get a glance out of the window. All around them are men. Lying. On the ground. Dead? Climbing even higher, Dazai tries to look. What he sees is someone in a car a few feet away from them, pointing their gun right at him. What he hears is Oda's warning hiss. But what actually happens is a black-clad figure landing on top of the same car and crushing the shooter to pieces with an ear-splitting shattering noise before they can ever pull the trigger.

Dazai's mouth parts.

The world stops for a moment.

The black-clad figure glows red.

Red.

And it's not Akutagawa.

"*Dazai!"* Oda jerks him down again and pushes both of them towards the other door of the car. "The car is going to blow! Get outside!"

He is forced out of the car — he is not sure how his feet even work considering he keeps trying to look back, keeps trying to get another glance and see if he was right or if this is just an insane pipe dream that he doesn't even *want.* But of course, he is right. Dazai is never wrong. Except… Except when…

Oda shields him with his own body as he hurries them back, back, past the countless cars that were just on their trail but that are now either useless, ruined, or empty because everyone has already been taken out. Not far away from them, Dazai sees *more* coming because,

of course, there are more, but he also sees Rashomon's jaws opening wide and attacking everything inside. Dazai finally turns back and —

That elongating sword is cutting through the air again. This time, Dazai remembers. *Tetchou graduated top of his class in the military police and then became part of an official special military division tasked by the government to hunt down and capture powerful ability users when they use their skills for criminal activities.* He remembers how he was able to manipulate his saber, bend and extend it — just like the sword that's shooting towards them right now. He also remembers that Dazai probably should have been nicer when he rejected him as his potential bodyguard. Maybe then he wouldn't have somehow joined the law enforcement in their task to kill them right now.

Except the sword never reaches them.

Of course, it doesn't.

Of course, Dazai was fucking *right.*

Because that black-clad figure throws themselves — or, rather, *himself* — in front of it, slamming the saber away with a red outline around his body and doing it over and over again, making the asphalt shake with every step forward as the sword bends into a slightly different direction trying this way and that. It's like watching someone toss a snake again and again.

A hand pushing him forward makes him snap his head on again, lungs squeezing tightly as he tries to keep up with Odasaku's quick, long-legged pace.

"Where are we going?!" he yells.

"That car!" Odasaku shouts back and points at one a few feet away.

Dazai understands, resists the urge to look back again, not when he's already struggling to keep up anyway.

They're so close, barely two feet away, when a black jeep beats them to it, cutting off their route to their getaway car, and immediately several masked people jump out, intercepting them. Dazai turns on his heels only to see two of them: two jeeps and two groups of people. And Odasaku is —

Where is Odasaku? What is happening? Dazai raises the gun he held onto all this time, aiming at whoever dares to approach first, all while

his eyes try to find Chuuya amidst it all. Because that was Chuuya. Who else could it be? As if he would know about the special division and just let them drive into a trap? Right? *Right?*

But he doesn't see Chuuya, only hears earth-shattering explosions that could belong to him. And it's that little moment of hesitation, that foolish, naive spark of *hope* that makes him forget all the lessons his father once drilled into his brain and not pay attention anymore because as soon as his gaze darts back to his current situation, his knees are already giving out and the world is turning *black*.

When he feels himself stir awake, it's with a pounding headache throbbing in the back of his skull. Groaning under his breath, Dazai squeezes his eyes shut and blinks. Then does it again. When nothing happens, and everything remains black, he tries again for the third time, a flare of panic seizing him as it doesn't work.

His hands shoot up but —

They're bound behind his back.

Ah.

So he hasn't gone blind. He's just a captive. Now he's sure some people would argue that being blind would be better than the latter, but, well, the darkness is quite scary. Or, not so the darkness, but the lack of sensory input from his eyes; makes everything else feel so much… louder, and everything is so loud without it already.

Now that he is conscious, the memories start flitting back in like a distraught picture book paging through itself: that endless drive back to Yokohama, the interstate, the chase, Odasaku, and —

And Chuuya.

Or, at least, someone who Dazai thought was Chuuya. Or, maybe he just hoped it was him in that final moment before he got taken, clinging to a shred of hope that somehow survived inside him. But even that epically failed, given that he's still here, still captured, still *taken.*

Exhaling quietly, Dazai closes his eyes — even if it's unnecessary — and focuses on the sounds around them. A deep hum… of an engine. He's in a car. Yes, they came with jeeps. He strains to listen to voices, someone else's breathing next to him. When he comes up short, he

wiggles his shoulders a bit, fingers trying to stretch from where they're bound, but as soon as he does, someone's hand settles on the knot binding them together as if to tell him that, yes, he's not alone, and no, he won't get out of these any time soon. Oops. Their breathing is really soundless. Something Dazai was taught, too, but apparently, he was too busy fantasizing about death to internalize the lesson.

"You know," he says, voice coming out way scratchier than it should be, "you should reconsider this whole kidnapping thing. I can get pretty annoying when I don't know what's going on."

His only reply is the muffled sound of wind outside.

"Oh, so you don't want to chat? How rude. Why even kidnap me if not for my lovely mouth?" Dazai sniffs, smelling old fabric and sweat that most likely comes from himself. "Unless you're the police or the special division unit, but then you guys seriously have to work on your capturing methods because I highly doubt this here is considered legal. And I didn't even do anything! I'm just an innocent college student. Not even that! You see, I was on a break, and —"

The car comes to a sudden halt, and Dazai swallows as he waits for something else to happen. He hears doors slide open before that hand again pushes him up and forward.

"Watch your feet." A high voice. Very soft. Very feminine. "There's a step."

Despite the warning, his stomach still plummets as he steps out of the car, expecting the ground a bit sooner than it actually comes. God, this is terrible. He laughs nervously. "I really do hope we stopped because I'm so convincing that you changed your mind. Trust me, I can get *really* annoying."

"Let's go," the voice says again. "Come."

"And may I ask where we're going?" he inquires politely. If the lesson with Tetchou taught him anything, it's this. You never know whether the person you're talking to might end up trying to kill you someday. And considering, he's a captive… well.

He feels cold wind bite at him as the stranger leads him somewhere. It's a short walk. Soon they're stopping again, and Dazai is about to ask again when he feels the thing around his eyes being tugged down, at the same time as someone snaps:

“I said the blindfold wasn’t necessary.”

“Sorry, boss. We thought it would be safer.”

The cloth around his eyes gets yanked down. Dazai blinks a few times, if only to gain time before he opens his eyes and the world repaints itself in colors of red, blue, and black.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way,” Nakahara Chuuya says, looking at him for the first time in nine months. His fingers, gloved, are still working to untie the blindfold around his neck, but they waver ever so slightly. “We had to get you out of there, and this was the only way to do it unnoticed.”

I’m sorry it had to be this way.

That’s it?

That’s all he gets?

The surge of anger shooting up his spine drowns out everything else. The desperate wish to finally look at someone he has been thinking of almost every day for a year. The shock of the unfamiliar, new markings adorning Chuuya’s face. The eye patch. Even the surprising and relieving realization that he isn’t someone’s captive who is about to get subjected to a lot of pain. All of it is nothing compared to the scalding red that razes hisnervous system to the ground.

It floods him. It fills every empty space inside of him with nothing but blazing, bitter, agonizing anger — and humans are 99% empty space.

“Release him,” Chuuya orders before his one eye travels back to Dazai. Pausing. Like he isn’t sure what to say.

Dazai feels his composure shred away piece by piece the longer he stands there, looking at him. The moment the binding around his wrists is released, it crumbles like dust. Like dirt. Softly.

“I’ll explain everyth…” Chuuya’s words come to a stunned halt when Dazai lifts his hand to his face, fingertips hovering over his flushed, marked cheeks before they slide down to rest against the curve where his neck meets his shoulder. Then they squeeze. Hard.

A thin, choked noise slips out of Chuuya.

“You’re *sorry?* You’re really SORRY? YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT

IT'S LIKE TO BE SORRY? I WILL SHOW YOU —"

Several people jump to drag Dazai and his fingers away from Chuuya's throat all at once. Though physically overpowered he might be, they can't take his tongue.

"— YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT! WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE SHOWING UP HERE AFTER 9 MONTHS?! I'LL RUIN YOUR LIFE, CHUUYA! I SWEAR TO GOD AND ON EVERY PERSON HERE, I WILL *RUIN* YOU!"

And all Chuuya does is stare, watching Dazai get dragged away as his gloved fingers touch the place that Dazai tried to squeeze the life out of a second ago. But that expression on his face? That look of shock? Oh, that will sustain Dazai's for *years* to come.

Chapter End Notes

> I know I'm a whore for this cliffhanger but it is what it is. Next chapter will bring a decision, a (chaotic) breakfast aaand a gift!

Chapter 18: Of Gollums and Rings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For someone who spent *months* coaxing Dazai out of the shell he built around himself, Chuuya doesn't enjoy seeing him break through it, and with a feral snarl at that, as much as he once thought it would. It stings. Even if it's no surprise either.

"— think this is going to stop me? This is *nothing!* You're n—"

"Another word about the boss, and I'll snap your neck," Shion hisses, one of the few special-selects that were tasked with the mission to steal Dazai out of Taneda's fingers an hour ago.

Chuuya sighs, flicking his fingers towards them. "Don't threaten him. Let go."

Her lips press into a thin line, hesitating.

"Let go of him and *leave,"* he snaps. As if he can't handle a freaking temper tantrum – with the help of his ability or without. Getting out of someone's chokehold is something he can do in his sleep if he has to.

Shion shoots Dazai, who yanks himself out of her delicately deadly grip, a narrow-eyed look before bowing her head to Chuuya and striding towards the chopper behind them. For all the space between them, both physical and mental, the air feels crammed with tension.

"I'm sorry," Chuuya says again.

Dazai's hands ball into fists by his side, but he doesn't try to choke him this time. Baby steps. "You can be *dead*, for all I care. Where's Odasaku?"

"I'll explain everything on the way. Right now we —"

"On the way?" Dazai's gaze travels behind them then lands back on Chuuya's face with a look of pure venom. "You must have truly lost your mind if you think I'm going anywhere with you."

"It's not safe for you to stay here, Dazai."

He already knows it's the most inept thing to say right now, but it's the truth. The car could have been followed. That damn bribable piece of shit called Tetchou could show up here anytime now, and Chuuya's not sure how much fight is left in him after the show on the highway. They need to leave as soon as possible.

"Safe," Dazai echoes with a mocking scoff. "Is still about that then? You're still going to pretend it was always about that and not about an egomaniacal power trip triggered by your wounded pride?"

The wind around them whips as hard as Dazai's words. Chuuya closes his eyes for a moment. "Is it going to change anything if I say yes?"

Silence.

"Yeah, didn't think so," Chuuya answers himself. "I'm not here to beg for your forgiveness or try to change what happened, okay? I just want to help you get away so you can stay out of jail. That's it. Then you can hate me for the rest of your life if that's what you want."

Dazai's nostrils flare as he wraps his arms around himself. "Get it into that thick skull of yours. I don't *want* your help."

"Well, tough luck because right now I'm the only one you've got," Chuuya snaps.

"I can take care of myself!"

"Really?" Chuuya flings his arm through the space around them. "You want to *walk* home? Do you even know where we are? Or where to go after this so they won't find you?!"

"I would have still had my dorm if not for you —"

"You still have it, and *I* didn't drag you back into the mafia. You made that choice all by yourself, so don't blame *me* for the fact that the law enforcement has their sights on you too now!" The flame of anger flickers out as quick as it lit up, though, leaving Chuuya cold and tired, scrubbing a hand over his face. "There's a safe house where you can stay for now. Oda, Akutagawa, and Atsushi should be there by now, too. Please, just… just come with me."

It's only at the mention of Oda that Dazai's stubborn expression falters and bleeds into sour resignation. Stupid. Chuuya just should have said that from the start. But no, he was naive enough to believe that his words would be somehow convincing enough.

“Fine,” Dazai grits out through clenched teeth and juts out his chin. “But only because you kidnapped my friends as well. I’m not doing this for you.”

Refusing to move until he knows Dazai won’t try anything stupid like run away or steal the car, Chuuya watches him puff out a huffy breath and stalk past him towards the chopper.

“Trust me,” Chuuya mutters under his breath, “*I know.*”

No one who refused to answer one single radio call for nine months *would.*

After Chuuya sits down and gives his people a go inside the chopper, he first ignores Shion’s look, then has to shove away the bottle of water she not so gently tries to give him. He focuses on the thrumming whine of the engine and the smell of fuel and gun oil as they take off and not at the way Dazai refuses to spare a single glance in his direction across from him. He fails. Chuuya’s eyes slide over him anyway, greedily taking in his appearance for the first time in nine months. Because seeing photographs is one thing. This… is quite another.

His face is as sharp and delicate as ever, hair tousled, but the left side is tucked behind his ear, making him look a bit older, and his skin… there is a color to it now, like it has been inhaling fresh air and sun for a while. It has. They were hiding out at a farm the entire time. The pictures he saw were all taken outside, too. It makes sense.

“*Stop* looking at me,” Dazai hisses without looking in his direction.

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “We’re in a helicopter. There’s not much else to look at.”

“Then why don’t you use that special ability of yours to take a seat outside? You’re stealing all the good breathing air.”

“Watch your tone,” Shion warns from the side.

“And take her with you while you’re at it,” Dazai adds.

Chuuya stops Shion from doing anything silly with a cautioning look.

“You’re speaking to the boss of the port mafia, boy,” Shion says anyway. “I’d suggest getting your attitude under control.”

Of all the things to feel, it's embarrassment that rushes through Chuuya. He has grown into his position, that much is a fact, and he loves his people, but he didn't do any of it to one day steal Dazai back and try to force him into forgiving him again. Dazai's not a subordinate. Not an affiliate. Not even a friend anymore. He doesn't owe Chuuya anything that Shion demands of him right now.

"Oh, that's right," Dazai drawls, crossing his arms with a cruel, bitter thing of a smile on his face, glinting like the blade of a knife. "Chuuya's the boss now. How dare I not fall to my knees and promise my unyielding loyalty to him, hm?"

Chuuya only stares back silently.

"But then again, I'm only a helpless, little thing that wouldn't know anything about the port mafia and its bosses. Right?"

"If you want to say something," Chuuya shrugs, "then say it. Go ahead."

Dazai's actual name and identity might have been a shock the size of a boulder back then, but it's not really a threat to Chuuya. His people accepted him as their new leader because he worked his ass off for it, because he bled for them, *died* for them, and because he earned it, not because of a fucking status that gave it to him. And if his people were able to let go of Mori, who by no means was perfect but still just and capable in his own ways, then they sure as hell will be able to let go of the last standing child of a boss that almost drove the organization to ruins.

Loyalty is forged by blood and sweat. Not by inheritance.

Dazai's lips curl cruelly. "No. I think I'll save it for *later*."

Having Dazai and that scheming head of his as an enemy is in no way something to underestimate. Dazai will set his ass on fire and sit back with a cup of hot cocoa to watch him burn; Chuuya's sure of it. But the thing about having Dazai as an enemy is that it also means having Dazai in his life. It means he cares. A small part of him still does, even if it's only to hurt him back. And that's way more than Chuuya even expected to get. So the implicit threat only makes him want to grin like a goofy idiot. For the sake of getting through this chopper ride alive, he doesn't. He just leans back and continues counting the beauty marks on Dazai's face.

(There are 8 of them.)

As soon as the chopper touches ground again, Dazai almost stumbles over his feet in his hurry to get out. His adorable attempt at pushing the doors open fails, though. Chuuya watches him struggle for a minute before giving Shion permission to *slide them open*. Dazai doesn't look back when he climbs out.

Chuuya follows in time to see him rush past Yosano, whose smirk quickly melts off her face when her only greeting and reply after so many months is empty air. Turning to Chuuya, she cocks her brows. "I guess that didn't go well?"

"It went exactly as I thought it would," Chuuya mutters. "He tried to *choke* me."

"Don't worry, Chuuya-kun. Hate-sex is always the best."

He only grunts in reply as they steer towards the stairwell of the roof where Dazai vanished a few seconds ago. "Is everyone okay?"

"Akutagawa is pretty battered but okay. Everyone's safe and sound."

"How did Oda take it?"

Yosano shrugs. "Well, he didn't try to kill me, so I guess better than Dazai." When Chuuya doesn't say anything, she elaborates further, "he didn't like that we separated them even though I explained that it was simply the best strategical choice if we wanted to get anyone out of there."

"He'll come around," Chuuya says. The only thing he can really offer her.

"Mm. It's… awkward having them back," she admits then. "I feel like we're not on the same page anymore."

"That's because we aren't." And as painful and as uncomfortable as that admission is, it's simply the truth. "They spent the last nine months together. Without us. And we spent that time without them."

"Hold me," Yosano says, grabbing his arm. "I have never done awkward before. I don't know how to deal with such mundane things."

All Chuuya can do is snort because he has a feeling that they will have to deal with things being awkward for a while.

They take the stairs together until they reach the door of their safe house. Chuuya's legs feel wobbly when Karma, another special-select for today's mission, opens the door for them, and it's not only because of nerves. The picture of a barren living room area and four of his former friends and co-workers, that feel more like strangers now, greet them. Akutagawa's lying on the couch, bandages covering his shoulder and arm. Atsushi is by his side, lines of worry darkening his face. Oda apparently just stepped out of the shower, only wearing a towel around his hips, his disheveled, crimson hair still wet. And Dazai… well, Dazai is determined to look everywhere but at them – and by everywhere Chuuya means Oda. Dazai clings to the man like *they* have been separated for the last nine months.

"Chuuya-same." On the other side, Akutagawa almost tears himself in half to get up, only held down by Atsushi, who seizes him a warning glare. "Thank you for helping us on the highway."

"Yeah, well, one of the reasons they want you in the first place is because I refused to play with them, so," Chuuya waves Akutagawa off when he once again tries to stand up, coming closer instead, "'s the least I could do. How are you feeling?"

"Just minor scratches."

"He got stabbed by that saber," Atsushi corrects with crossed arms. "That's hardly *minor."*

"I can fix you up real quick," Yosano offers by Chuuya's side, "but only if you're willing to bleed for it."

Port mafia's reaper is what people nowadays call the executive. It's not without reason.

Chuuya wants to add that Akutagawa should think about it first when he notices Oda approach, bracing his hands on the couch. Dazai stays behind him and leans against the wall instead. "What were the other reasons?" Oda asks. "If you don't mind me asking. But I'd like to know why I'm suddenly a criminal."

Pressing his lips together, Chuuya's gaze travels to Atsushi, who doesn't notice it until everyone's attention snaps to him as well. "Huh, me?"

"Remember why the guild wanted you?" Chuuya asks.

Atsushi scratches the back of his neck. "That man, Fitzgerald, went on

and on about some book. I still don't know what he was talking about."

Which is why his relevance baffles Chuuya still. How is this boy supposed to help them find that damn thing?

"The special division for unusual powers has put it into their heads to find the book and seal it away for safety purposes," he explains. "They want the port mafia to help. That's why they found *you* and tried to bribe us with it, but it's also why they tried to arrest you when we didn't play. Arresting you, especially Atsushi, would mean also having their hands on you. It's as simple as that."

"And arresting *us*…" Oda muses out loud.

Chuuya nods. "Is incentive to get us to co-operate."

"I'm sorry," Atsushi murmurs in the wake of the silence that settles in the air. "I… I have no idea what they could possibly want with me." Then he looks around the room. Specifically the people he's lived with for the past nine months. "You're all criminals now because of me…"

"Oh, don't take all the credit for that," Dazai suddenly speaks up and pushes away from the wall to stroll over and join the circle that has formed around the couch. "Odasaku and I wouldn't have even been associated with you if not for dear *Chuuya-sama.* Blame him."

"As far as I remember, you were the one who refused to leave the man alone no matter how many times he warned you of exactly *this*," Yosano butts in before Chuuya can, stroking her chin in mock contemplation. "But sure, yes, blame Chuuya for the agenda of some government twerps."

"Yosano," Chuuya murmurs.

"What? I'm right."

That she might be. It's still a delicate topic.

"And Odasaku?" Dazai prompts instead with the same shit-eating tone he was just on the other end of. "What's his connection to us three then?"

"Yes, I dragged him into this entire thing. I can take as much blame for it as I want. It doesn't change the fact that you two," he jerks his head towards Atsushi and Akutagawa, "are now wanted criminals who

are on the run of the public and you two," his eyes slide to Dazai and his bodyguard, "were labeled their dangerous accomplices."

"I'm mafia. I'll always be wanted in one way or another," Akutagawa says with an apathetic shrug. "It doesn't matter."

Atsushi looks more stricken than his counterpart as he sits down on the arm of the couch, pinching his bottom lip. "This isn't exactly what I had in mind when I left the orphanage, but I guess that's what I agreed to when I joined the mafia, right?" His gaze lifts to the people around them as if searching for an answer that no one here can give him. "What the heck. It's not like I have anything else to show for myself."

"You joined the port mafia under Mori's rule," Chuuya points out softly. "If you want to leave, change your identity, and start a new life, I won't stop you, Atsushi-kun."

Atsushi's eyelids flutter in surprise before he glances at Akutagawa and his grim determination to stay here and work off the debt he thinks he owes Chuuya. Then his expression mellows out in something soft. "Like I said. I wouldn't know what else to do anyway."

That's fine and well, but not surprising either. Public defamation like that is only a pebble to kick away for people like them, for people like Chuuya, who grew up in dirt and darkness and who will end up there someday as well. There's no reputation or righteous life to lose if you've never had one, to begin with. However, it's something else entirely for people like Dazai or Oda. Uprooting. World-shattering.

"I'm assuming there is the reason you don't want to help them find the book?" Oda guesses.

Chuuya breathes out a huff. "Only preventing a bunch of government quacks and politicians from getting their hands on an item that is supposed to make anything that's written into it into reality. That reason enough?"

Oda scratches his forehead before he looks at Chuuya. "So what about you? Does the port mafia intend to find it first then?"

Feeling the weight of Yosano's gaze burning holes into his cheek, Chuuya shakes his head. "The port mafia doesn't want anything to do with that damned thing."

"So you're not going to help them find it, but you're also not going to

stop them from doing it either," Oda concludes out loud. "Doesn't that amount to the same thing in the end?"

"It does," Yosano agrees. "Giving the people who are already in power a tool to be even more powerful? Sounds like an apocalypse scenario to me. Not to mention that we could clear everyone's names if we used the book, and —"

"We're *not* using the book," Chuuya cuts in with a firm shake of his head. "There's a reason why it's so hard to find, and it doesn't take a lot of creativity to imagine why. Besides, if they're desperate enough to collaborate with the mafia, then they don't have many leads to go on. So it's *not* our problem."

Yosano shakes her head. "It's a powerful thing, but so are you, Chuuya, yet you still haven't let it get to your head. Better if you have it than if they do, or god forbid, someone with even worse intentions, and you know someday someone *will."*

"You know what the book is? It's like *the ring.* It's not only powerful, but the mere idea of it corrupts. I mean, look at everyone who has tried to find it and tell me they didn't go insane looking for it." Chuuya throws up his hands. "I'm not going to turn into freaking *Gollum* just because it's more convenient!"

When he is met with silence and puzzled frowns, he raises his brow. "What, none of you watched *the lord of the rings?"*

"These words mean nothing to me," Yosano says and wrinkles her nose. "I'm too pretty to watch those movies."

"You are *Gollum* already," Dazai mutters under his breath at the same time.

It evokes an achingly sharp memory of the two of them spending their night bingeing the entire trilogy — the extended versions even, and sharing a bowl of popcorn, commentary, and occasional body-warmth — so fleeting it slices his skin like a papercut and leaves Chuuya with the stinging pain of sudden longing. God knows how many hours he lay awake in a bed filled with the so simple yet so brutal desire to have Dazai back again, hear him rant about the latest book he read, and watch him try and fail to figure out washing machines, not knowing if he would ever be able to do it again someday. But ever since Chuuya found out that Dazai was okay, that he spent his days on a farm and that he looked happy in pictures, he smothered the flame of it into a tiny spark here and there, if only so he wouldn't spend the

rest of his waking days go around with a gaping hole in his chest.

Now Dazai is right here, though, grumbling out comments and playing with the sleeves of his sweater, and Chuuya feels his entire blood system gush out of his wound and onto the floor. He's back, but Chuuya is not in on the joke anymore. He's outside of it.

When Dazai notices him looking, he only meets Chuuya's gaze to glower at him. Chuuya lets out a breath and searches the room for something to sit down without abandoning the circle. Yosano notices and wordlessly raises a brow. He waves her off.

"All I'm saying," he summarizes instead, "is that if I were to go after the book right now, I would be no better than the rest of them. It's a bad idea. Full stop. There are other ways to clear your names and stop the special division from finding the book if they actually manage to get any closer to it."

"So *we* don't get the option to change our identities?" Dazai suddenly asks.

"Sure you do, but usually changing your identity means not staying in the same place where you're considered a criminal and…" Chuuya clears his throat. "... you know."

Dazai's mouth twists into a cold smile. "I don't, actually."

Chuuya feels his eye twitch. How many more times is he supposed to say this, huh?

"Spell it out for me."

"Fine. Considering you all just came back from a trip like that, I assumed you wouldn't want to leave again because of *me.* But maybe I'm wrong about that too, so if you want to leave, I'll provide you with everything necessary, and if you don't, I'll provide you with everything necessary too! Just make a fucking wish, and I'll be your goddamn god fairy."

Dazai makes an indecipherable noise in the back of his throat before folding his arms together and turning away, nose high in the air.

"How about," Yosano starts, "we all rest and take a night to think and regroup before we decide what to do next? It's late, and I'm sure you're all tired from that car ride and the fight."

Chuuya knows for a fact she is not trying to get *them* to rest but, to be honest, his bones feel too tired to fight her about it right now. “We’re in an abandoned military base deep in the mid-southern mountains. No one will be able to find you here, so, yeah, relax. Sleep. The kitchen is fully stocked. We’ve got electricity and enough bedrooms for everyone.”

As soon as he has said his piece, Yosano is dragging him away and towards one of said rooms.

“Take it easy,” Chuuya mutters when the door falls shut behind them. “Don’t want to make them think we’re hiding something.”

A dry huff comes from Yosano as she opens her medical bag on the bed. “Technically, we *are* hiding something.”

“Hiding something important, I mean. *This*,” he sits down and accepts the pills she presses into his hand, “is not of any relevance to them.” He only hears how pitifully his words drip with misery once it’s already too late to stuff them back in his mouth.

“You don’t know that until you actually tell them.”

Rolling his eyes, Chuuya swallows his medication with a gulp of water before letting out a breath. “Well, I don’t want to, and as my doctor, you’re not allowed to either. The same goes for any and all reasons you might want that fucking book.”

“That book could save your life and spare you from years of agonizing pain, but sure, let’s pretend like wanting that makes you the bad guy.”

“Technically, I’m the boss of the mafia,” Chuuya quips, getting rid of his jacket. “I *am* the bad guy.”

Yosano just shakes her head and jerks her chin towards another door. “Take a hot shower while you still can.”

“It’s not that bad yet,” he grumbles, “I‘m just tired.”

“Uh-uh, but it will be.”

Yeah. The mornings after always are.

Dazai feels like he’s stuck in someone’s twisted version of a comedy play. He is sharing a roof with the same people who turned his life around without so much as permission, who were radio-silent for the

last nine months and who have decided to do it all over again. And the worst thing is: he doesn't want to leave anyway.

Not only because Odasaku has expressed his wish to help out as much as he can while the police forces consider him a criminal. But because there is something about all of this that makes his senses tingle. Something that makes him want to be useful the same way he wanted to be useful when he was still a student and Chuuya just an executive. Maybe the leftover traces from his upbringing are to blame. Once a scheming mafia child, always a scheming mafia child. Maybe it's a distraction from his chronic boredom. Or maybe it's the desperate wish to punish Chuuya and watch him bleed.

Whatever it is, it makes Dazai find himself in the kitchen, yawning around a cup of hot cocoa that he found and watching Odasaku prepare a breakfast meal that could feed the entirety of Yokohama. Sometimes he wonders how so much food can fit into *one* man. Then he remembers how much time Odasaku spends on his feet throughout a day, *despite being a writer,* and the question answers itself.

Energetic people…

Bit by bit, the others come trickling in as well: Atsushi in a blue yukata, followed by Akutagawa, who sits down at the table and blankly stares off into the distance, something he does every morning.

It's a scene that is routine by now, the four of them together. The only thing that's different, if not the way Dazai's stomach has been tied in knots since the blindfold was yanked down yesterday, is Yosano strolling into the kitchen in a silk bathrobe and greeting them all with a yawn.

"Morning," she mumbles, heading towards the coffee machine. "Everyone still alive?"

Dazai blends out the chorus of replies and keeps his eyes on the direction she came from instead. Last night he couldn't fall asleep, no matter how many times he closed his eyes and tried to pretend that Odasaku's breaths were white noise, so he did some exploring of this safe-house of theirs. What he discovered is that Chuuya's loyal dogs are as rude behind his back as they are in front of him, that the TV channels still have nothing interesting to offer, and that only three out of the five rooms were occupied, which means that Chuuya and Yosano shared a room.

He's not sure what kind of evidence he will be looking for on Chuuya

— he just knows that he doesn't expect Chuuya not to come out at all.

Even after thirty minutes pass.

Then forty.

Finally, Dazai breaks eye contact with the hallway and swivels his gaze to Yosano and the almost-finished omelet in front of her, Odasaku-style. So they're already sharing food. They're really not wasting any time, are they?

When she notices his attention, she flicks her chopsticks in his direction. "Want a bite?"

"No, thanks," he says. "So a night has passed, everyone is rested, now what does that grand plan of yours look like?"

"*We* go back to our work as planned. It's you people who have to decide whether you want to keep a low profile for now, disappear again, or stay with us."

"You say *we* like there is someone else here."

Yosano snorts out a breath. "You know what I mean, twinkle toes. Don't be so stingy."

Dazai's jaw clicks with pressure. "I just assumed the very boss of the mafia wouldn't have time to sleep in, but what do I know about that."

Apparently, his words are for naught because she seems all too content to ignore him in favor of eating her food. Odasaku clears his throat and shoots Dazai a wordless look. Dazai isn't happy about it, but he gives him the permission to go ahead with a listless flick of his finger. He hates it here.

"We'll stay," Odasaku announces. "Help out where we can. Clear our names. There's no point in running again."

There was no point running in the first place but that's left out, of course.

Yosano's nod is nonchalant, but there is a smile hiding under there, a big one, and Dazai has to look away and cover his mouth with his hand so he won't barf except that looking in the other direction puts Atsushi and Akutagawa sharing smiles in his field of vision, and that's even more nauseating. His chair makes an awful scraping noise as he

gets up, only for his brain to make an even louder noise when he sees Chuuya come out of his room.

The dark cloud of hatred in Dazai's chest gets replaced by confusion. Now Chuuya is no god of ethereal beauty or anything. He looks just like every other human being in the morning: tousled hair, puffy cheeks, and barely-open eyes, especially when he hasn't had a cup of coffee yet. But right now, he just looks *rough.* In every sense of the word. His cheeks are splattered with reddened patches of skin, one eye bloodshot, and his steps uncharacteristically stiff. However, the moment Chuuya notices Dazai, his shoulders pull back, body visibly relaxing.

How strange.

How very, very strange.

"Hey," he says.

"What's wrong with you?" Dazai demands.

"Huh?" Chuuya drives a hand through his hair and shrugs innocently. "What do you mean?"

Dazai narrows his eyes. If Chuuya had a reason to be innocent, he'd just tell him. Say, the fight yesterday was brutal. Or he fell down a flight of stairs. Or someone tried to kill him. Whatever. But the act of denying it is already proof enough that there is much more to the story than this lying piece of traitor lets on.

"What do I not mean?" he deflects instead because two can play this game (and let's be frank, Dazai is much better at it.) "You're a patronizing, deceiving caveman, that's what I mean. And *now,"* he takes a step to the side, "I am going to the bathroom to wash my eyes after having had to see you. Goodbye."

Chuuya blinks at him. Dazai uses it to make his escape to the bathroom. Although his plan was to spend the rest of the day sulking in his room, he switches tactics and decides to spend it figuring out Chuuya and his secret instead. He does wash his eyes, not because of Chuuya, but because he feels like it. *And* he fusses with his hair. Stroking it this way and that way before giving up and just pulling his front bangs into a tiny ponytail so they will stop bothering him. He's due for another haircut, it seems.

After he's done, he returns to the main crime scene, where only three

people are left. Atsushi and Akutagawa must have decided to stink up their room with their love hormones instead. Good. One less thing to be annoyed about.

Chuuya, who has been chatting to Odasaku and Yosano seated at the table while preparing his breakfast, glances up when Dazai struts in, eyes lingering on the hair for a second too long before falling back to his tomatoes on the cutting board.

"— already made arrangements to head out this afternoon. We'll be back in Yokohama by six o'clock," Yosano says, tapping away at her phone.

Since Dazai hasn't had breakfast yet, he makes himself comfortable next to Chuuya, whipping out a cutting board of his own and a knife. A huge and sharp one.

Chuuya pauses. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm cooking."

"I can —"

"No thanks. I'm perfectly capable of preparing my own breakfast." To demonstrate, he opens the fridge and gets out two eggs. See? He doesn't need help, least of all Chuuya's.

The skepticism remains lingering on Chuuya's face, but he doesn't say anything. Good. Or else the eggs would have landed on his stupid face and not in the pan.

Behind him, he hears Oda ask, "what exactly does the plan look like?"

Next to him, Chuuya reaches for the stalk of green onions he prepared for himself. Dazai beats him to it, stealing it and slapping the entire stalk on his cutting board before he starts chopping. Loudly.

"Seriously?" Chuuya mutters.

Dazai chops harder.

"You don't even *need* that much."

"I do," Dazai insists over the noise. "I'm very healthy now!"

Chuuya makes a low, annoyed sound in the back of his throat before stalking over to the fridge.

“Uh,” Dazai hears Yosano say, “we will let the special division make the first move to see what kind of strategy we’re dealing with — if they even want to go there after losing their main cards, but let’s be real, they most likely will.”

While Chuuya is away, Dazai slides his board over the counter and accidentally topples over Chuuya’s poor tomatoes all over the floor. When Chuuya spins around and sees the mess, his reaction would be worth *billions* — if not for the fact that Dazai doesn’t get to properly save it because Chuuya hurls the stalk of onions at his face with a hiss.

“You want to act like a fucking child?!”

Dazai scowls at the taste and onions right in his face before snapping, “maybe I do.”

“Fine,” Chuuya snaps back and promptly sends *Dazai’s* cutting board flying, along with the chopped green onions. They clatter to the ground. “Then here! No green onions for either of us!”

“Ha! I never wanted them in the first place!”

“Boys.”

“Yeah, really fucking mature of you, Dazai. What’s next? Putting a windy blaster on my chair and pretending we’re 12?!”

“Actually, I was thinking more of something like poison. It just has more pizazz, you know?”

“Why don’t you d—”

“BOYS.” Yosano’s voice finally cuts through their nose when a blade whips past them and gets stuck on the wall above the kitchen counters.

Turning his gaze from the knife to Yosano, Dazai blinks furiously. “You could have maimed my ten-billion yen face!”

“That’s a risk I was willing to take if it made you both shut your traps,” she retorts dryly. “Dazai-kun, sit down and let Chuuya cook your damn breakfast before you both burn down this entire building.”

“I’m not going to eat anything that *he* makes. I’d rather starve, thank you very much.”

“How about I do the cooking then?” Oda gets up and gently steers

Dazai to take his place instead. “You two… just sit down. I’ll be quick.”

Chuuya slumps into his seat like a heavy bag of potatoes, basically bleeding exhaustion all over the floor, which is odd because he clearly had more than enough time to sleep *and* he already had his coffee, Dazai could smell that. Chuuya should start being an bouncing ball of energy right about now. Musing about what to cook for dinner later. Bothering the people in his kitchen with annoying banter. Getting dressed and doing his stupid hair and humming under his breath.

Not scrubbing a hand over his face like the only things keeping him up right now are loose stitches.

Then again, nine months ago, he was an executive. Now he’s the boss of an entire crime syndicate.

“And no talking,” Yosano adds with a warning hand gesture. “Or even looking.”

Dazai blows air out of his cheeks. “How about we stop breathing, too?”

Yosano shoots him a look. “What did I just say?”

“I —”

Her fingers press together in what is probably a demonstration of shutting his mouth. It’s the threatening glimmer in her eyes that finally convinces Dazai. Rude. Everyone here is so incredibly rude.

Behind her, Oda keeps his promise and manhandles the ingredients that have been spared into submission, the stove already sizzling a few minutes later.

“Anyways, as I was saying,” Yosano continues, nonchalantly draping one arm over her chair, “the course of action depends on the special division’s next move for the time being. We have an inside man that will report to us as soon as any plans are made. As for clearing your names, we have a team of lawyers that could take the case to court. It will take time, though.”

Dazai can’t help but snort softly. “I can be my own lawyer.”

“You study literature, not law,” Chuuya immediately points out.

“Wow, thanks for telling me that. I had no idea! However, I am not confined to my major. Trust me.” He gives Yosano a few forceful nods despite her scowl. “I could totally represent myself.”

“That’s sweet, Dazai-kun, but if you’re going to court, then you should opt for making yourself look like the innocent literature nerd who accidentally got caught up in all of this. Representing yourself will make you look too mysterious. Guilty.”

Although she has a point, Dazai chooses to ignore it. “Perhaps I don’t want to be the innocent literature nerd.”

“Then why are you here?” Chuuya barks out.

Ah, the question of all questions that Dazai can’t answer, not truthfully anyway, without making himself seem like the exact thing he is struggling against. Especially not to him. Not to Chuuya.

“Because we all know the special division is not going to stop until you either help them get the book or hand over Atsushi, so *never*, and because you will all need me, my knowledge, and my bodacious brain. Simply put: because I’m generous like that.”

Chuuya’s jaw clenches, but he leans back without any further comments. Oda serves them two plates of scrambled eggs without any green onions. They eat in silence.

As soon as they are back in Yokohama, Yosano gets called to the base because she is needed at the infirmary, which leaves Chuuya stuck with the job of escorting Dazai and Oda to their new, nearby safe house that they will be staying at for the time being. Now it’s only fair that Chuuya is present. Dazai is Dazai, no matter how much he hates Chuuya, and Oda is here because of Chuuya. It’s just that he was hoping not to be the third wheel. But he is. He so is.

“Look, Odasaku,” Dazai exclaims when he climbs out of their car. “A cat!” He’s already heading for the thin, grey thing before Chuuya can even close the door, stopping a few feet away to squat down and offering the cat his hand to sniff. After a moment of hesitation, the creature tentatively does, then bumps its head against him. Oda joins the two of them with a smile.

Chuuya watches them for a moment, sharing grins and murmurs with so much natural intimacy that everyone with a healthy pair of eyes can see how close they are to each other — and how much Chuuya,

standing on the outskirts, does not fit into that bubble around them anymore.

There's this razor-sharp, cutting ache in the back of his throat, making it hard to breathe, let alone swallow. After nine months of living with it – fuck, even after last night, Chuuya thought he had already experienced every kind of pain that a human can feel. It turns out there is still an entire world that he has yet to discover.

"Boss, do you want me to wait here or accompany you?"

Chuuya is thankful for Karma's question — and presence — even though he is mostly so dutiful and observant that he barely speaks, finally letting him tear his gaze away and focus on practicalities. "You're coming with us."

Karma nods.

Chuuya walks a few steps and glances around. For a neighborhood that's balls-deep in mafia territory, it's exceptionally peaceful and quiet. That's because most of their echelons reside here. The first apartment Chuuya ever lived in is right down the street, and why he decided to locate them here in the first place.

"—saku, we should get a cat as well. Or, just adopt this one. Look at her. She is obsessed with me."

"She might have an owner."

"Well, the owner should take better care of her then. What is she doing here all alone on the streets? Hey, kitty kitty. Do you have a death wish? You can tell me. I won't judge, I promise."

While Dazai is busy having a heart-to-heart with a cat, Oda rises back to his feet and takes a look around himself before he joins Chuuya, who has been occupying himself checking the mailbox of the two-story building.

"Is that a shop underneath the apartment?"

Chuuya hums as he frowns at the printed advertisements. Some people really wander into mafia territory just to promote a fucking cheese stand. They're nuts. "It's a book store with a cafe inside it."

"Thoughtful," Oda comments quietly.

Chuuya just shoots him a dry look. Whether this was intentional or not doesn't matter. Not anymore. "Keys," he says instead and hands them to Oda. "The locks can be annoying sometimes, so try them out now before waking me up at two in the morning."

A few feet away, he hears Dazai snort, still pouring his heart out to the cat.

"Lockpicking will do you no good here," Chuuya adds loudly so the idiot will hear it. "You're staying here for a reason."

This time, Dazai is quiet.

Oda gets the door open on his first try, what with being mister flawless and all, and of course, that's when Dazai finally decides to bid goodbye to the furry stranger and get up off the ground. As Chuuya said: it doesn't matter, yet he still can't help but sneak a peek at him when Dazai sees the book store, his mouth forming into a tiny *o*. It's fleeting. There and gone. Dazai's eyes narrow instead and swivel around, but Chuuya is faster, already looking away.

A part of him shakes his head on the inside. Twenty-two damn years old, the head of a criminal organization, so much dirt and blood on his hands, and he is acting like a middle schooler who is scared to confront his crush. It's embarrassing.

He lets Dazai and Oda take the lead on the staircase, being on the rear with Karma, trying not to listen to the quiet voices ahead of him.

"Odasaku, do you still plan to publish your book?"

"It will probably have to wait a while."

"But afterwards? Under your own name?"

"Eh… I am not sure how many people would want to read a book from someone who was considered a criminal not too long ago."

"Don't be silly. That's exactly what they will want to — well, because it's wonderful, too — but that mysterious flair will attract the masses. You know how people are. Always pretending to be saints when in reality, they all crave something darker. Oh, you should definitely let me do the marketing strategy. Or, you know, add me to the team. Don't worry, you don't need to pay me. For you, I will be free."

Chatty, Chuuya thinks. Dazai is so *chatty* with Oda. And cheerful. *And*

physical. His fingers reaching for Oda's coat on the last step, their shoulders brushing when they unlock the door, Dazai holding onto Oda's arm as they step inside.

And suddenly, a thought crosses Chuuya's mind: what if they're together? Like, in-a-relationship together? They spent nine months in some desolate village with less than a hundred inhabitants. Akutagawa and Atsushi clearly used the time to bond and explore their 'partnership.' Now look at them.

Letting the door fall shut, Chuuya slips out of his boots with a numb sensation buzzing through his chest. There were times when Chuuya even hoped for it. Dazai finding happiness with someone else. Falling in love. Experiencing all those wonderful, wretched things for real this time. Chuuya hoped for it when he sent him away, not knowing whether he would ever even see him again. Chuuya hoped for it when the detective finally gave him coordinates and photographs showing that Dazai was alive and safe, showing that he just didn't want to come back. Chuuya hoped for it every time he was so close to death that he could see the light, beckoning him to step closer, to embrace it. Just a step, so it will finally stop hurting.

But that's the thing about wishes made in the dark. They look different once the sun rises again.

With a sigh, Chuuya makes sure the security system is up to date and functioning, ignoring the faint echo of voices wandering from room to room. Then he gives Karma a slight nod. "Go downstairs and make sure everyone knows what to do."

"Yes, boss."

Chuuya waits until the boy is gone before forcing himself to find Dazai and Oda. He has visited this apartment quite a few times already, so he's familiar with the outline of it. The bright, lofty rooms. The impenetrable windows. The cozy kitchen. The heated floors. And, of course, the small library where he also happens to find them: Oda trailing his fingers over a work desk in the corner and Dazai with his nose already buried in one of the books from the shelves.

"So?" Chuuya asks, leaning against the doorway. "Tolerable enough to live here for a while?"

Oda's smile is somehow knowing. "More than tolerable. It has more character than the other safe houses, that's for sure."

Yeah, well, probably because Chuuya only made it into a safe house because of recent events. When he first acquired the place, its purpose was slightly different. Slightly more permanent than just the place to live in while the law enforcement is looking for you.

Not that he plans to share that. Not when Dazai doesn't even spare a single glance in his direction, pointedly and loudly flipping through the book in his hands like he is trying to drown out Chuuya's voice.

"Well, I figured it should be somewhat nice if you're going to stay here for a while. The kitchen and the pantry are stocked with food, but there's a grocery store right around the corner. Mafia-run, so you don't have to worry about getting recognized. There are basic clothes in the closets, but if you feel like personalizing your wardrobe, or get anything else for that matter," Chuuya fishes out his wallet and slides out his black card to offer it to Oda, "it's covered."

Oda looks skeptical but takes the card.

"You have several computers, laptops, iPods, phones, and TVs here. All important numbers to reach Yosano or me are saved in the phones but also listed on the note hanging in the kitchen." He pauses. Is there something else? "Oh, yeah, you also have a car. It's in the garage next to the shop. Keys are in the hallway, same with all the other keys." After another moment, he nods. "I think that's it."

That's it and time to go. And yet, despite knowing there's no place here for him, actually leaving is harder than it sounds.

Nine months.

He spent nine months thinking about seeing Dazai again, and just like that, he's supposed to go again. Now he knows he will see him again, knows it won't take as long this time, but he doesn't know *when.* He can't ask for a *when.* And he has no excuse to just drop by whenever he feels like it, either. He just has to go.

Probably sensing his hesitation to leave, Oda announces he will walk him to the door.

"It will get better," he says quietly when they're out of Dazai's earshot. "Give him time."

Stepping back into his boots, Chuuya shakes his head. "He has every right to be mad and take as much time as he needs. It's just…" He misses Dazai. He misses Dazai like a lung. "It will take a while to get

used to it.”

When Chuuya rises back to his feet, he notices Oda’s eyes linger on the eyepatch. On the corruption marks. “What happened?”

“Won a battle against the guild, lost an eye,” he says because explaining corruption and what using it did to him in full detail isn’t something that he is willing to share at the moment. Or, ever. It happened, he’s still dealing with it every day, and someday he will most likely have to make a decision, but for now, it only concerns him and the people who already know about it.

“But you’re okay?”

Chuuya’s hands curl ever so slightly around the doorknob. “Fine.”

“Good. And thank you for this.” The words roll over his lips like he knows exactly that this apartment isn’t just a safe house but something he wanted to make someone’s home someday.

But Chuuya has a feeling Oda has the decency to keep this between the two of them, whatever his status with Dazai might be.

“You too.” Chuuya offers him a tiny, lop-sided smile. “For keeping everyone safe, I mean. I owe you a big one.”

“I think clearing my name will be a good start.”

Yeah. He supposes it is.

Chapter End Notes

> Next chapter you can expect an invitation, the return of a rat, and several truth bombs being droppedddd :)

Chapter 19: Raised To Ruin

Chapter Notes

> After 2 months and my exam season, I'm finallyyyy getting over the writing block that I stumbled against with this fic! So my apologies for the wait but it is what it is and I appreciate everyone who left a sweet comment and waited patiently <3 I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Yosano Akiko doesn't do awkward. She doesn't skirt around subjects because they make her feel uncomfortable. She doesn't commit to things only half-way. She doesn't step over lines only to retreat again.

She is a surgeon. Her cuts are clean — even if sometimes painful. And although her room might be cluttered sometimes, or her purse, *Yosano* herself isn't a messy person, or else she would have not ended up in the positions she is in now: a Russian mafia boss on one side, a Japanese mafia boss on the other, and most importantly, an executive title that both earns her fear, respect, and every damn pair of heels she has ever desired.

That is why, on a Wednesday afternoon, she finds herself rapping her knuckles against the door of the third man in her life — the only one whose ties to Yosano are not nice and tidy. Instead, they are frizzled, too thin on one end, all wrong. (Well, and there is Dazai. While she personally wouldn't mind adding the brat to her harem, Chuuya and Dazai himself probably would.)

The brat, however, is precisely the person who answers the door. Yosano was rather hoping for Sakunosuke since he wouldn't greet her with a snobby scowl and a grumpy, *"what?"*

"Let me in, would you?"

"Hm, let me see." He pretends to think for a second before offering her an empty, tight-lipped smile. "No, I don't think I will."

"Dazai-kun," she warns, returning his false pleasantries, "you do not want to play games with me right now. I spent the last twelve hours saving someone's life who tried to kill me several times just for politics and power plays, and I *still* did my make-up, put on pretty clothes and drove here. I will not leave until I get what I came here for."

Dazai lets out a melodramatic sigh, its only purpose to mock her. “That sounds rough.” And then he has the audacity to actually try to close the door. “Anyways, good luck with tha—”

“Oh no, you won’t,” she hisses, throwing herself against it before Dazai can shut her out.

Dazai grunts as he attempts to shove her back. “You should work on accepting a *no* when you hear one!”

“You should work on growing up and realizing that people make mistakes!”

“Making a mistake and being a patronizing, stupid cave-man are two very different things!”

“I’m neither of these things, so why are you mad at me?!”

“Oh, like it’s so hard to see whose side you’re on!”

Growing tired of this childish tug-of-war, Yosano changes tactics and tries to get a glimpse past Dazai. “Sakunosuke! Sakuno—”

It works, but not the way she thought it would. Dazai’s muscle go lax; he stops trying to keep her out and finally, letting her inside, only so he can hiss, “be quiet, Odasaku is sleeping!”

Taking several steps away and dusting herself off, Yosano scoffs. “Okay, geez. Waking up won’t kill him, you know.”

Dazai only crosses his arms.

“Okay, okay, I’ll be quiet,” she relents, holding up her hands but also not resisting the urge to roll her eyes. Though his behavior makes her think twice about it. “Very protective of Sakunosuke, aren’t you?”

“Problem?”

“Depends.” Yosano’s eyes roam around the apartment — she’s been here before with Chuuya, of course, but the two new residents here have already done some changes. She picks up a book that’s lying on the grey couch. “Are you trying to steal my man or not?”

Dazai snorts, loud and provocative. That little shit. “Bold of you to claim that someone you abandoned for nine months is yours.”

“I stayed because I made a promise to someone, and he left because he

made a different promise. No one abandoned anyone." But that doesn't answer any questions. "So," she presses, cocking her brows, "do you have feelings for him?"

"Who knows," Dazai drawls. "Maybe I do. That would suck, wouldn't it?"

She chuckles softly before meeting his gaze. "I don't mind sharing, buttercup. You do have an exceptionally pretty face."

To her surprise his expression doesn't falter that quickly. He actually strokes his chin in consideration. "You underestimate how much joy I would get out of pissing off Chuuya."

"Don't get me wrong, I understand wanting revenge, and god knows, you two have a lot to work out, but is that really how you want to spend your time?" She pauses her snooping in front of their fridge where she recognizes Sakunosuke's handwriting: *And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good.* Then she looks at Dazai over her shoulder. "After everything he was to you?"

"Life is long enough to spend a portion of it punishing someone," Dazai replies with an oblivious shrug.

Because he doesn't know. He doesn't know that it's where he is wrong.

Yosano turns her attention back to the fridge. Hiding the fact that his time *is* limited if Chuuya keeps going like this, is a recipe for the next emotional fallout with the people he cares about, but it's still his mistake to make. His secret to keep.

"Not this life," she says instead. "You of all people should know that the top is high and narrow and everything but safe."

"Is that why you're here? Chewing my ear off about forgiveness and the value of life? Because if yes, I would prefer to jump out of a window instead of listening to that."

"Don't be so dramatic, and no, that's not why I'm here." After Yosano places her purse on the kitchen counter, she rummages through it before she finally finds the things she is looking for. "Here." She offers Dazai two beautiful black-and-gold-colored invitation cards. "I'm here to invite you and Sakunosuke to a dinner we're throwing to celebrate your return."

To no one's surprise, Dazai only spares them one single glance, not bothering to accept them, so Yosano decides to stick them to the fridge instead. A place where Sakunosuke will see it. "Don't bother throwing them away. I will leave Sakunosuke a message."

"You could have just sent them by mail — or better even: not send them all. It amounts to the same thing."

"Well, I figured it's safer to bring them over personally considering your way of dealing with communication attempts. And Atsushi and Akutagawa already agreed to come, by the way."

"Good for them," she hears Dazai mutter. "I simply don't care." But it must sting a bit, right? After all, it was the four of them in the last nine months. It has to spark *something*.

"I'm sure Sakunosuke will come," she muses out loud and shoots Dazai a look once the cards are successfully hanging on the fridge. "Come on, you really want to spend your night all alone? We used to be friends, Dazai-kun. It doesn't have to be like this."

He is still jutting out his chin stubbornly, but Yosano can hear the cracks in his icy facade. Just a tiny bit more. Another push.

"I mean, if pissing Chuuya off is your goal, then a dinner is a good place to start." She shrugs innocently. "Just a thought."

Dazai's eyes narrow. "You're not a very good friend."

"Oh, so you do care about him? Great. Then I'll see you this Friday!"

"I didn't say — Yosano — wait."

She does, silently raising her brows.

"I will only come if you tell me a few things first."

Yosano considers that, then nods and says, "Deal. What do you want to know?"

"Fyodor?"

"In St. Petersburg right now, but he will be back soon."

Dazai's fingers tap against his folded arms, but he doesn't look too shocked to hear it. "He helped with Mori?"

“Yeah.”

“You seriously trust him?”

“Trust is a big word,” Yosano says. Okay, so maybe, she was lying earlier when she said she doesn’t do messy. Maybe a few aspects of her relationship with the Russian boss are somewhat complicated — they have become so over the months. Like the fact, that she still has yet to figure out what exactly his goal is here. Or the fact that she sometimes wishes she didn’t have to figure it out. But that’s something she already knew from the start. Men like Fyodor Dostoevsky don’t come in clean cuts and neat borders. They’re like water instead. Always slipping through your fingers. “But he has been useful.”

Dazai huffs softly. “You do know that usefulness always comes with a price?”

“Everything comes with a price. I know. So be my guest and try to figure out what’s his, but for that you will have to show up to the dinner. Right? Right. Anyways —”

“Nuh-uh, not so fast,” Dazai chides and blocks her from leaving by stepping in front of the door. “I’m not some cheap whore you can pay off with one answer only, sensei. I don’t work like that.”

Yosano can’t help but smirk and pat his cheek. “I know you’re not cheap, twinkle toes. Trust me, I’d pay a lot for you.”

“Do you have to insert sexual innuendos into every single sentence you say?”

“Honey, you came up with the analogy.” She places her hands on her hips then. “Fine, fine, as much as I love us talking like this again, I am unfortunately in a rush today, so go ahead. Ask.”

For a moment, Dazai doesn’t say anything, and she fears he might have forgotten the question. And then:

“Was he miserable without me?”

Huh.

“Chuuya, I mean. Was he miserable? Extremely, earth-shatteringly miserable?”

“Seriously? That’s what you want to know?”

“Pay up, Yosano-san, or you won’t be seeing me at any dinners.”

Yosano crosses her arms. “What do you *think?”*

“I think that you should probably answer the question.”

How does listening to someone radio you every single day for months on end not immediately answer the question? Isn’t it obvious? Unless…

She bites her lips as a few dozen thoughts cross her mind at the same time.

“You really don’t know whether he was miserable?”

Now Dazai is the one squinting and trying to understand. “I thought I was the one asking the questions?”

Unless he really doesn’t know, which means that he didn’t listen to any pathetic radio messages. That would probably explain a lot of things. So many things, actually.

“You should ask him,” Yosano says because right now she is sitting on an explosive piece of information. If she doesn’t tread carefully it might blow up in all their faces. “And he’ll tell you.”

Dazai’s cold glare says enough: *honor the deal.*

“My god, Dazai-kun. Of course he was miserable,” she snaps before yanking him away from the door and opening it. “And he’s still kind of miserable, by the way. You know for such a clever kid, you’re really socially obtuse sometimes.”

She doesn’t hear his answer, her heels already rapping against the stairwell floor as she thinks how to untangle this mess these people here have created. It’s not hard to figure out where to go first, though.

Oh, she knows exactly what to do.

—

And the first comes with a pair of gleaming violet eyes, a lazy smile, and a lilting Russian accent.

“How nice of you to fetch me from the airport, Akiko dear.”

Kicking the door to their apartment open — technically, Chuuya's, but there is no use in pretending she is planning to leave any time soon — she hums before shooting him a smirk over her shoulder. "I needed to get on my hands on you first before anyone else could."

"And here I was thinking you would be already busy with someone else's hands." When she doesn't answer, Fyodor asks, "They didn't like their warm welcome?"

"Some did. Others not so much. You know how it is."

"I can imagine who didn't."

Yeah, I bet you fucking do, Yosano thinks to herself when she lets them into her bedroom. Her face doesn't betray any of that. Words that don't match her expressions are messy. Not her style. So a sultry smirk it is as she places her fingers on Fyodor's chest and guides him to the bed until he's under her, gazing at her like she is his salvation when he willingly offers her his wrists. Like the only reprieve he ever finds is when he gives himself over and lets her do with him as she pleases.

He'll even like this, she muses, while she loops his wrists through the handcuffs. Nothing like a dangerous edge of reality and human betrayal to make it more exciting.

The handcuffs fall locked with a soft *click.* Fyodor looks as relaxed as one can be, cuffed to the headboard, eyelids already drooping shut as Yosano comes to rest on top of him, offering him a hazy smile as she trails her nails over his chest once the shirt is unbuttoned.

"So," she says in a voice as soft as silk, "tell me. What actually happened to the radio?"

Sluggish eyes blink up at her. She stares him down until he wields with a melodic sigh. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Don't play stupid now, Fedya. It's not cute, and I don't like it."

"What makes you think *I* know?"

"Because Chuuya, or someone as loyal as Akutagawa, wouldn't temper with it. Other mechanics said there's nothing wrong with it either. But you worked on it first. You did something to it, didn't you?"

Fyodor briefly tugs on the cuffs before relaxing with one intentional breath. "And what will you do to me if I did?"

“Nothing.” She pauses before continuing. “I will do nothing except letting you lie here to stew in silence.”

Punishment, pain, torture — that he can take. But the silent treatment? That is bound to get something out of him.

Fyodor doesn’t give in, per se. He just squints, considers his options, and probably decides he would prefer to have her try to kill him than do nothing. “It’s so easy you won’t believe me, but I promise you, I am telling the truth.” Yosano waits. “I switched the radio.”

“You switched the radio,” she repeats flatly. He is right. It does sound insanely simple. But that’s also why it’s plausible. Why bother damaging something that others could fix when you could just switch it out with an identical replica and let people go stupid trying to fix it. “Okay. I believe you.” Her hand travels higher until her fingers can seize his chin instead and squeeze it as she makes him meet her gaze. “Now why the *fuck* did you do that?”

As expected, he only grins wider in her grip. “Chuuya wouldn’t be where he is right now if the radio had worked. It was too early for Dazai to come back.”

“That wasn’t your decision to make,” she snaps.

“But taking down Mori was. And helping Chuuya keep his position was. To do that, his little boy toy had to play with cows for a while longer, and you and I both know, he wouldn’t have listened to me if I had told him that.”

“Yes, and it would have been his goddamn right to do. He only became boss because he thought Dazai didn’t want to return. You took his choice away.”

“Same as he took Dazai’s choice away, and same as you are taking my choice away by tying me to a bed and forcing me to confess all my sins. Life is a constant power struggle, Akiko dear. That’s just how it is. And in the end, Dazai and company are back, and everyone is happy. It was a small sacrifice in the grand scheme of things. I’m capable of doing much worse.”

“Yeah,” she agrees mockingly, “you only sacrificed Chuuya’s relationship to Dazai.”

“That’s a bit dramatic. I’m sure they will work it out.”

“Once the truth about the radio comes out, maybe, but what about you then, huh? Chuuya will kill you if he finds out you’re responsible.”

His eyes gleam in the low, intimate light of their bedroom. “And yet you didn’t go to him first. You came to *me*.”

Yosano’s fingers curl into a fist, then uncurl again. Messy. This is fucking messy. “Why did you do it? Why did you want Chuuya as the boss so badly? What are you getting out of it?”

“Because he was the best possible choice for the job,” he says simply. “Because with Chuuya as a boss, the port mafia continues to do its job and I can do mine.”

“That’s it?”

He gives her nod, if somewhat curt. “That’s it.”

“I don’t believe you,” she whispers.

“It doesn’t always have to complicated. Sometimes keeping things stable is the most powerful tool, and Dazai… he was a distraction for the time being. He would have ruined Chuuya before Chuuya could even stitch himself back together. That’s what Dazai does.”

“He’s just angry and rightfully so, by the way.”

“He is the former child of the most ruthless boss this city has ever seen. He was raised to ruin, Akiko. It’s the only thing he ever understood. Don’t let his sweet, little literature student act fool you.”

Yosano shakes her head. “Then you’re the same.”

“I never said I wasn’t.” His smile sharpens dangerously. “We all are. Me. Dazai. Chuuya. Those two other boys. Sakunosuke. *You.”*

The angel of death. That’s what the men she brought back to life over and over just to let them die again called her. That’s the little monster Mori once shaped her into. Nowadays, she goes by Yokohama’s reaper. Still bringing mafiosi and enemies alike back from death’s doorstep except this time she’s doing it to let them fight in her own war, not someone else’s.

Still.

In the end, it’s the same thing. Just painted in a different color.

“Give me one good reason not to tell Chuuya,” she says. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kill you where you’re lying right now for lying to my face all this time and for keeping *him* away, too. Sakunosuke. He was a distraction too, right? Not to Chuuya, but to me? To my place in the port mafia?”

“If you wanted me dead, I’d already be dead.” He dares to shrug lightly and act like this is fucking funny. “But I’m not. You tell me why.”

Life would be a lot easier if she knew the answer to that question. As it is, all she knows is what she wants right now. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not in the long run. And right now what she wants, is to wrap her fingers around Fyodor’s throat, slide her lips against his and feel him fight for each breath that she allows him. Because she knows there will always be another secret lingering with him, always some kind of betrayal and a price to pay at each corner, so at odd with Sakunosuke and his honesty, and yet she still finds herself unable to let go and give up no matter how much she should. She is addicted to the feeling of having the possibly most intricate and cunning man in Russia bend for her over and over. And the thing about addictions is that no one wants to give them up, even when they make life *messy*.

—

She’s lighting herself a cigarette afterwards when she says, “he can’t know what you did with the radio, or he will kill you.” Then she casts a hardened look at him and the way he is just lying there on his stomach, ass bare, and chin resting on his hands. “Can you come up with an explanation once the truth comes out?”

“Of course I can.”

He probably already had one — or several ones — prepared for months in case someone found out. It’s a miracle in itself that he told her the truth at all. Then again, maybe that’s why she chooses to keep it for him. Why she chooses to let him stay. It was the truth, but it was also an offering.

Several minutes pass in peaceful silence, the pleasant ache from good sex and the rush of nicotine pumping into her lungs keeping Yosano content for now. The sound of the door opening and falling closed intrudes eventually, followed by Chuuya’s mildly aggravated voice speaking to someone on the phone. A moment later, he unceremoniously walks into the room, still in the middle of a

conversation and searches the floor for something.

Taking a drag of her cigarette, Yosano watches him, decidedly not thinking about how she is technically betraying him. When Chuuya finally ends the call with a sigh, she asks, “what are you looking for?”

“My ring. I can’t find it anywhere.”

“You missed the show,” Fyodor says instead and lifts his head. She can’t see his face but she can imagine the lazy smile he’s offering Chuuya all too well. “But if you give me five minutes, you can join.”

Chuuya only rolls his eyes, not even batting an eyelash at the state of the two of them: a bit sweaty and more than a little naked. “No, thanks. I’m busy. Have you seen my damn ring?”

“Probably somewhere on the bed,” Yosano murmurs, kicking the sheets away from her. He always tosses it away when he loses his clothes, and while she thinks rings are attractive accessories, she knows all too well that they get irritating when you’re at home.

“Aw, your little friends are back for one day and we’re already no use for you,” Fyodor drawls. “That’s a shame, Chuuya. You had so much fun with us.”

“By the way, the dinner is on. All of them are coming.”

That’s when Chuuya’s head snaps up, his eyes going wide. “Hah? All of them?”

Yosano feels herself smile as she confirms it with a nod.

“Oh.” Chuuya gives up on his search and sits down on the edge of the bed. “Oh god. What did you do to make that happen? Threaten violence?”

“Nope, just suggested that the dinner would be an effective way to piss you off,” she replies with a shrug. “So be prepared for a half-hearted murder attempt.”

“Yeah, I’ve lived through enough of those,” Chuuya mutters. “It can’t get worse than breakfast, right?”

“Breakfast?” Fyodor inquires curiously.

“We were having breakfast at the safehouse and Dazai made a point to almost start a food fight,” Yosano explains.

Fyodor hums. “Sounds in character.”

“What am I even saying…” Shaking his head, Chuuya gets back to his feet. “It can always get worse. I have to go.”

Yosano manages to call out, “Go where?”

“I need a haircut!”

When she turns back to Fyodor, he is making a face. “He is so cute. Why can’t we keep him?”

She doesn’t answer, only throws a pillow at him so he will shut up. If there is anyone to blame for losing Chuuya, then it will be Fyodor himself and all his deceptions. But then again, Yosano is in the same boat. They are both to blame now.

Yosano rented out an entire restaurant to arrange the dinner. The port mafia headquarters would have been too formal for such an occasion, too stiff for people that are not *just* subordinates — or, not at all. His apartment, on the other hand, would have brought up too many memories, not to mention be potentially dangerous in case the government people are keeping an eye on it. So a restaurant it is. A fine one, very exclusive and intimate, excellent food, a wonderful rooftop outside area, and obviously mafia affiliated.

And after the day Chuuya had, he is actually looking forward to just sit down and eat, even if someone will most likely spend the entire evening giving him hell. At least, it will be Dazai. Someone he can endure as much hell from as necessary.

Apparently, though, some people didn’t get the memo that this is an *all play no work* kind of event:

“-- I’ve been waiting for days now, but I still haven’t received any news or orders. Except from Higuchi. Higuchi called me about a hundred times, but not about work. Are you still angry for what happened on that day when Yumeno walked free? Is it that? Because if it is, tell me what I have to do, to make up for it and I will.”

“Akutagawa-kun,” Chuuya says, stacking his plate with more food than he will be able to eat, just so he has an excuse to ignore the man bothering him right now, “do I look angry to you?”

“…no. I don’t know. Not right now.”

“Then stop trying to piss me off. I want an hour or two of peace and quiet, and you’re here bothering me about not being called in to work yet — because you’ve been almost sliced in half, by the way. You’ll get to work when you’re ready.”

“I am ready,” Akutagawa protests immediately. “I’m here. I’m standing. I’m ready.”

“No, you’re a junkie is what you are, and that’s a personality flaw you’ve got to work on by yourself. Relax while you still can and leave me alone.”

“With all due respect, I’ve been relaxing for the last nine months —”

At that moment, Dazai and Oda exit the elevator and they – Dazai looks unfairly handsome in the loose, black pants, matching shirt, and a brown, v-cut sweater draped over it he’s wearing. Oda too but it’s not him that Chuuya has to physically drag his eyes away from.

“You want to work?” he hisses, yanking Akutagawa closer by his sleeve. “Then help me with Dazai. How much does he actually hate me? Is it an *I’m really mad at him* kind of hate, or more of an *I’m 100% utterly done with that bastard*?”

“Um.”

Chuuya levels a scowl at him. “You were there with him all the time. You should know.”

“I only was there to protect him,” Akutagawa retorts, “and the biggest threat at the farm were dogs. A lot of dogs.”

Eyes narrowed into puzzled slits, Chuuya lets go of him. “Dogs?”

“Dogs.”

“Guess you failed to see the special division agent sent there to spy on you because of the *dogs.”*

Akutagawa’s face falls even further. It makes Chuuya lets out a sigh and massage his temple, not having had the intention to blame him for that. “Nevermind, none of you did. That was their goal.” He scans the room then before looking at his subordinate. “Where’s your boyfriend? Did he spend time with Dazai?”

“It was mostly Oda-san. And Emily. And Belinda.”

“Who?”.

“Emily was one of the rescue farm workers. Belinda was…” For some reason, he trails off. Chuuya raises his brows expectantly. “Belinda was a cow,” Akutagawa finishes flatly. “It’s a long story, Chuuya-sama.”

“Okay. Whatever.” Chuuya turns back to the buffet and glares at the section reserved for drinks and liquor. “I’m not fucking drunk enough for this.”

As if on cue, he hears someone clink cutlery against a champagne glass. He’s not surprised to see that it’s Yosano. “If everyone would please take a seat at the table!”

As opposed to how this conversation started, Akutagawa now seems all too happy to flee. *A good tactic for future references,* Chuuya notes to himself, *just scare him away with his own personal bullshit.*

Except that it wasn’t a tactic. Chuuya could genuinely use a few pointers as to what to do about Dazai. Leave him alone? Fight for another chance? Let him punish him until he eventually grows tired of it and forgives him? The only person who could help him with that is Oda, though, and he seems to come attached with Dazai nowadays. Case in point: Dazai sits down next to Oda at the end of the table.

Chuuya doesn’t plan to intrude on that, but Yosano, who is seated across from Oda, has other plans: she all but forces Fyodor to sit down on her other side, which only leaves one place: the end of the table, and, of course, directly across from Dazai.

He thanks her with a glower. She replies with a wink before rising to her feet. *Traitor.*

“I would like to propose a toast for this special occasion,” she says into the round, offering nothing but a brilliant smile. “God knows, the last year hasn’t been easy, and the next few months won’t be easy either. We all have things to catch up on and work out —” Judging by the wave her gaze swivels into Dazai’s direction specifically, that’s about them. “-- but I think we should first take a moment to celebrate that we’re all here, together, in one room. Alive. *Healthy.* So before we all throw ourselves head-first into work and battles and god knows what else tomorrow, let’s just spend one single night as if we were normal human beings who are gathered here just because.

“And in case some of you workaholics haven’t gotten it: the subject

work and *port mafia* is banned tonight." That earns Akutagawa a direct look. "If you break the rule, you pay the tab, and trust me, this restaurant isn't cheap." With that, she raises her glass. "Cheers to this little group and this night."

It does feel awfully wrong to say "cheers" and pretend like this is something ordinary, like there isn't a mountain of baggage between everyone here, but for the sake of trying, Chuuya does exactly that, if only to have an excuse to down his entire glass of champagne in one go. He is sure he will need it.

To his surprise, so does Dazai, and without any snide remarks or comments either. Not a single word, actually. Nothing. Which is suspicious, but also something to appreciate while he still can, so Chuuya digs into his food instead.

"Sakunosuke, I've wanted to ask ever since you came back now," Yosano starts, "how is the novel coming along?"

Oda waits to chew and swallow before answering. "I finished it, actually, so I'd say pretty good."

"You never told us what it's about," Fyodor chimes in casually.

As much as Chuuya admires how quick the two of them work as a team, he also feels a pang of jealousy in his breastbone because *he* used to be like this once. Easy-going. Charming. Good with people.

Until Dazai.

Until Dazai entered his life, and just — ransacked it like a fucking tornado, making everything so fucking complicated and hard and gloomy. Just for that, Chuuya allows himself to steal Yosano's glass of champagne.

"Don't tell him, Odasaku," Dazai suddenly says. "Fedya here has the habit of *stealing* things and then lying about it."

"It was one toy, and it was years ago. Get over it already." Chuuya can't see Fyodor, but he can imagine the condescending expression he must wear right now. The image alone pisses him off.

Yosano only laughs instead. "Aww, you guys fought over toys? That's adorable."

"I'm just saying. Once a rat, always a rat."

“I think you might be confusing me with yourself, considering you’re still acting like a brat.”

“Like you’re not a brat yourself half the time,” Chuuya finally decides to add.

“Hm, you’re right. You would know, Chuuya.”

Maybe saying *that* was not the smartest idea, in hindsight. It makes Dazai acknowledge him for the first time tonight, but the look in his eyes is calculating, one that swerves from Chuuya, then to Fyodor, and back again.

“The book,” Oda says after he clears his throat, “is about a former assassin who decides to, uh, turn his life around one day.”

“What do you mean Chuuya would know you’re a brat?” Dazai asks.

Christ.

“It means that Fyodor is a fucking brat when he’s not busy acting all high and mighty,” Chuuya quickly replies, trying to salvage the situation. “Obviously.”

“Assassins? Wow, that’s… that’s interesting.”

Dazai’s eyes narrow.

And it’s not like Fyodor actually says something to confirm or deny the obvious suspicion, but it’s exactly that — his silence — that makes it actually worse. What makes them all seem guilty.

Dazai looks at Fyodor again. Then at Chuuya. And his head begins to shake slowly. “You… you *two…”*

“Don’t be a buffoon, Osamu,” Fyodor retorts dryly. “Us *three.”*

“Seriously?” Chuuya asks.

“What? If we’re going to have this discussion, we might as well be accurate.”

“You three?!” Dazai echoes before turning his attention to Yosano. “You have the audacity to ask whether *I* am trying to steal Oda from you when you’ve already stolen *my* Chuuya?”

My Chuuya.

He said *my*.

Letting out a sigh, Yosano places her glass on the table. “So we fuck sometimes. It’s just sex. Who cares?”

“Clearly you do, or you wouldn’t be so scared of me stealing Odasaku.”

“No, that was about *feelings*. Not sex.”

“Ah, well, in that case, we might as well come out clean as well,” Dazai exclaims. “Odasaku and I had sex as well.”

Chuuya knew this was a possibility, he was ready for it, but that doesn’t mean that hearing it out loud actually feels good. Especially not when knows that sex to Dazai isn’t just about stress release and fun. It’s something a bit more serious.

Oda scrubs a hand over his face, shaking his head. “We didn’t have sex.”

Oh.

“Fine, we kissed. Many times. But we might as well have fucked since that’s what you lot were busy doing all these months apparently.” His glare lands on Chuuya. “But I guess the only one who gets the privilege of your wonderful protection is still just me.”

“You can’t be mad about this,” Chuuya finds himself saying. “You did whatever it was with Oda too. We both did.”

Dazai snorts out a dry huff. “Except that I did it because I didn’t know whether I would ever see you again, while you did it while you were deliberately keeping me away. But sure, yes, totally the same thing.”

“Never see me again?” Chuuya echoes. “Don’t act like I didn’t beg you to come back for months on end. Don’t put that on *me.”*

“Are you having a stroke or are you just stupid?” Dazai demands.

“Hah?”

“What do you mean you begged me? Was I supposed to read your mind from the other side of the world?”

Completely lost, Chuuya shakes his head. “What are you — I radioed you.” Suddenly the silence in the room grows crystal-clear. “The radio

I gave to Akutagawa and that you ignored for half a year," he tries again because Dazai's expression looks as confused as he feels inside. "That one?"

Dazai blinks, then juts out his chin. "Stop *lying*. You're awful at it."

"Huh?"

"He's not lying, Dazai," Yosano says. Her voice is strikingly gentle. "He radioed you. For months on end."

"I'm pretty sure I would have known if that was the truth." But Dazai looks more and more forlorn with every second. Chuuya sees him swallow. "I never received any stupid radios. Not a single one. For nine months."

Chuuya's whole chest sags. "So you weren't ignoring me all this time?"

"*You* were the one ignoring me."

"I just told you I tried to —" And then it actually hits him: Dazai never got any radio calls. Chuuya's head snaps to the other end of the table. "Akutagawa, for the love of god, if you tell me that you forgot to check the damn radio —"

"I checked it," Akutagawa says. "I checked it every day for a while. Then every few days. I never received anything. I even have it with me, you can look for yourself."

"I can confirm that," Atsushi adds meekly. "He checked it every night. I was there."

"Jinko…"

"That's not possible." Chuuya's chair scrapes against the floor as he gets to his feet. "I fixed it. I let a few dozen people have a look at it. It was supposed to be working." He finds his coat and fishes out the radio that still resides there, even after Chuuya gave up on trying to convince Dazai to come back. Once it's turned on, he strides over to Akutagawa who has fished out the thing as well. "I fixed it," Chuuya mutters again as he presses the button that is supposed to establish a connection between the two radios. But nothing ever comes. Again, his only answer is silence.

Heart hammering, Chuuya looks at the radio, then his gaze slowly lifts

to Fyodor. "*You* said you would fix it."

"Chuuya," Yosano says.

"No," he snaps, stalking over, "what did you do to it? What the hell did you do?"

Fyodor's expression is infuriatingly steady as he gazes back at him. "It wasn't me, Chuuya."

"Then who was it?! Who else promised they'd fix it?"

"Think for a moment. Perhaps the same people who had already used Dazai and the others against you once? Or, I don't know, the other few hundred people who want to hurt the boss of the port mafia?"

It makes sense. More sense than Fyodor being responsible only to let them come back after all and then letting the secret come out anyway. But if it was the special division or someone else then — then — the only one to actually blame is himself. Just Chuuya. Because in the end it was him who only depended on the radio. Him who accepted Dazai's silence way too easily. Him who gave up. Him who —

"I'm sorry, Chuuya-sama," he hears Akutagawa apologize. As if he is somehow responsible for Chuuya's own stupidity. "I didn't know."

Chuuya wordlessly waves him away before spinning on his heels and walking away, not really sure where, just away from here, away from his own embarrassment, away from every fucking thing, his blood rushing in his ears as he follows floors and turns around corners.

He ends up in the kitchen, a few dozen wide-eyed cooks and waitresses turning to stare at him.

"S-Sir, can we help you with anything?"

"Bottles," he rasps out. "Do you have empty bottles somewhere?"

For a moment, they just look at him. Then the kitchen erupts into a flurry of movement and suddenly he's looking at a few dozen boxes of empty bottles. Good. That's good. Chuuya thanks them courtly and with the help of his ability, he takes *every single one of them.*

His secondary destination is somewhere isolated and somewhere with a wall which happens to be the outdoor area, not the main one, but for the stuff, trolleys with boxes and glasses and other stuff standing

there. Perfect. No one will mind if he just —

Three of the bottles crash against the wall with a slam that's too loud and too heavy for something as light as a bottle.

"Oops," he mutters under his breath — too much of his ability — and then promptly does it again. And again. Anger propelling him forward over and over. So much of it that it's all he can see, all he can hear, all he thinks about it. It feels a lot like the night he used corruption for the first time in years.

That day he let all of the rage that he had bottled up over the years run free.

He remembered all the people he had lost, all the things Mori made him do, all the things Mori let him become; he remembered Dazai and all the months he spent lying to him about who he was, but most importantly, he remembered that every thing that ever went wrong in his life happened because of his own mistakes. Too blind to see what was in front of him. Too bad of a leader to stay with the sheep. Too slow to save his friends. Too weak to not let Mori shape him like clay.

And now it's happening all over again. The urge to just let go again. To give himself over to a natural calamity because the pain of even a thousand corruption deaths would be easier than to live with himself but —

But he can't do that anymore. Putting aside the fact that he's not sure if it's even possible after Yosano brought him back, he can't do that because he's not alone. Not really. He has a job. And people who rely on his orders to survive every day. He has friends. He has people he cares about even if they hate him.

He can't be that selfish anymore.

So he breaks bottles.

One after the other.

It doesn't take long for the door of the patio too open. Chuuya wishes he could say he wasn't hoping to see Dazai for one single moment, but that would be another epic lie. It's Yosano. Of course it is. And even though a part of him wanted to see Dazai, he is glad that it's her anyway.

"You shouldn't use your ability for this," she says as she comes to a

halt next to him, wrapping her arms around herself in the freezing December air.

Chuuya breathes out a grunt and turns off his ability before smashing another bottle against the wall. The sound of it shattering into a thousand pieces is the only relief he gets.

Yosano looks at him. “You okay?”

“I’m great,” he mutters, fingers shaking around cold glass. “I just spent months talking to myself, convinced that the person that was supposed to be on the other end hated me and wanted nothing to do with me. I spent months doing that and never fucking considered any possibilities beyond that. I *wasted* all that time, but I’m fucking *great.*” *Crash.”* I wasted nine months.” *Crash.* “And now — now it doesn’t even matter that I tried to reach out. It doesn’t matter because it doesn’t change anything and it’s all my fucking fault.”

“We all just assumed that they weren’t responding to us on purpose,” Yosano retorts. “You’re not the only one to blame here.”

Chuuya shakes his head. “I was the one who gave up, though.”

“At least, now you know. Now Dazai knows that you tried to get him back months ago. It changes things.”

“It changes nothing. It’s just… “ His teeth grit, a harsh breath escaping him. “It’s just proof that I can’t get anything right. I’m supposed to be the boss. The *boss*, Akiko, and I can’t even use my ability without having to spend an entire day in bed afterwards. Isn’t that just ridiculous?”

A joke. That’s what he is.

Yosano stops him from ruining another bottle. Her grip around his wrist firm. “I think it’s proof that you’re just the most stubborn, the most resilient and also the strongest human being on this entire planet.”

“Don’t.”

“You’re dying.” Chuuya’s jaw clenches. “You’re dying a bit every day because of what happened. Because of what *you* let happen to yourself the last time you thought like that. And while that was incredibly stupid, the fact that you’re still standing here, even though I can see you being in pain every day, makes you stronger than most people. It’s

far from ridiculous, and it definitely doesn't make you a bad leader."

Chuuya's arm finally sags uselessly, his shoulders dropping. The bottle slips out of his fingers and shatters on the floor instead. "I still sent him away. Maybe I'm not a bad leader, but I sure as hell not a good human being."

"You thought you were protecting him."

His eyes fall closed.

"You made a mistake. We all make them every once in a while."

A moment later, he feels something cold against his hand. He opens his eyes to see another bottle.

"To drink," Yosano clarifies. "Not smash."

Chuuya exhales a quiet laugh before raising it to his lips and taking a few sips. It's good. Makes his chest feel warm despite the ruthless wind whipping his hair back and forth. "Thanks."

"Thank me after you talk to him." His brows raise skeptically. Yosano only nods. "He was angry because he was left in the dark for nine months. I think he might be willing to hear you out now."

Maybe she is right. Although Chuuya doubts that this is all it takes to fix the mess he made, this might be a start. He can survive a future in which they never get back to what they once were. But he needs to have Dazai, at least, speaking to him. Just something. Anything. As pathetic as that sounds.

They walk back together. Passing the kitchen staff feels like his personal walk of shame and Chuuya reminds himself to clean up the bottles tomorrow. Or, at least, leave a hefty tip that will make up for it. Or both.

There is still music playing in the dining hall. The buffet still looks delicious and mouth-watering. Everything still looks squeaky clean, rich, and expensive. But the only left at the table is Dazai and he doesn't look up at their entrance. Oda and Fyodor must be outside since that's where Yosano is headed after she gives Chuuya one last encouraging clap on the shoulder. Akutagawa and Atsushi, Chuuya doesn't know. But most distinctive is the oppressive tension that hangs in the air. It smells like spilled blood.

Taking a breath, Chuuya slowly walks over to the table until he reaches Dazai. Then he sits down next to him. For a moment, that's all they do. Both existing in each other's space in silence.

"I'm sorry," he says eventually, staring into the distance. "I really am."

"For what?" Dazai's voice is a cold, still lake.

Chuuya turns to look at him. "Everything."

Dazai meets his eyes, holds them, then looks away again. His hands are curled into fists. "You contacted us eventually, so you must have known where we were."

With a sigh, Chuuya drops his gaze and nods. "I hired a detective after… months. He gave me your location."

"Months," Dazai echoes. "How many?"

"Five."

"You knew where we were for the last four months, and you didn't think to try to reach out through another way instead of that *radio*?" Dazai pronounces it like something cursed. Maybe to them it is now.

"I thought you didn't want me to."

"You thought. Funny thing, Chuuya, but people get hurt every time you *think."* Chuuya flinches. "Maybe because you don't. You don't think. You just feel and then bleed those feelings all over everyone in your life, assuming that everyone feels the same just because they're covered in your shit. They don't. *I* don't."

Every word cuts, but Chuuya nods anyway.

"And you know? I think even that's bullshit. I think you're just a coward."

Chuuya glances at him, not sure whether to protest or let him speak or just sit here and endure it. Not sure how to even feel.

"Every sane person would have at least *tried* a different way before giving up, but you didn't even do that. You radioed me every day, you say? You begged me to come back? You only did that because you knew no one would answer. You knew you wouldn't ever have to face the reality if no one ever picked up because if you had tried, if you

had just tried one goddamn time to actually reach out…" Dazai's lips press together as a stray tear rolls over his cheek. "I would have answered. Because unlike *you*, I actually wanted to see you again, not some illusion that you made up in your head to make yourself feel better about your own mistakes."

Chuuya feels his own eyes burn with tears, but he bites his tongue, sniffs, and nods. "Okay."

Dazai's gaze hardens. "Okay? That's it? That's all you're going to say?"

"Maybe you're right," he says, shrugging. "Maybe thinking that you didn't want to come back was easier than actually hearing you say it. I gave up. You're right."

"What happened to you?" There's a cruel, almost disgusted bite to it. "The Chuuya I remember wouldn't just take a beating without a fight. My Chuuya always had something stupid to say."

"What do you want me to do? Do you want a fight, or do you want me to do better? Because I'm trying to do better. I'm trying to listen and not make the same damn mistake anymore and if that means hearing you list all the things that are wrong about me without talking back, then I'll fucking do it."

Dazai levels a glare at him and whispers, "you make me sick."

Chuuya only manages to flick his fingers in response. He makes himself sick too, sometimes.

"Stop doing that."

"Stop doing what?"

"That." Dazai jerks his head towards him. "That whole brooding, self-pity thing. It reeks. You reek. I hate you."

"I hate you too, you know."

"Clearly. You wouldn't just abandon someone you like."

"Love," Chuuya corrects. "I loved you. I was in love with you."

Dazai says nothing.

Chuuya nods. "Yeah. I wish you would have trusted me enough to tell

me who you were.” Maybe things would have been different then.

“You would have found a reason to get rid of me anyway. You were always searching for reasons.”

Or maybe not.

“I’m not searching for them anymore.”

A pause.

“Do you really mean that?”

One eye flickering up in surprise, Chuuya swallows. He expected something mocking. Not this. “Yes.”

“Okay,” Dazai says and then he stretches out one hand to him. “Come here, Chuuya.”

Too tired, too dazed to really think about it, Chuuya lets him take his hand, wrap his cold, long fingers around him, tightly, before all but yanking Chuuya forward until Dazai’s mouth hovers over his ear. “I will burn the *heart* out of you,” he whispers, as soft as a melody, “and then, only then, I will perhaps find it in me to forgive you.”

Chapter 20: Fog Of War

Chapter Notes

> Good evening, today I bring you a super long chapter number 20 >:)
>
> Warnings: explicit sexual content towards the middle-end, half-hearted slut-shaming...?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There used to be a time when the black tower in Yokohama was home.

He played with rusty instruments smattered with dirt and blotches of crimson in the basement. He watched his siblings bicker and spar and eventually die in the training center on the fifth and six floor. He hid in the freezer of the restaurant on the ground level before a black-clad mafioso always ended up finding him and dragging him back. He learned how to read and write in the conference rooms, his mind swerving off every now and then and falling to the gun around his teacher's waist, remember what it felt like in his hands when his father pressed it there and made him shoot someone. He had family dinners at the very top of the tower, the city's skyline behind him and the face of his old man, always busy and stern, in front of him.

There was a house, he thinks. A house with rooms and twin-size beds and a kitchen – the thing that usually pops into people's mind when someone mentions home. But the memories of the house are so flimsy that it might as well have not existed.

The tower. That is all that he had known back then.

Now the tower is looming above him as Dazai climbs out of the sleek black car and lets his eyes rake all the way up to the top. It is not home – it never was. It is not a school or a graveyard or a prison cell. It only is the high-rise building in the Minato Mirai 21 district, base to the port mafia, and the place where Nakahara Chuuya spends most of his time these days.

Fingers nudging the back of his spine forward make Dazai's skin crawl with irritation and he quickly dances out of the way before shooting the toddler in a suit that drove him here a withering smile. "You can go now."

Karma? That's what his name was. It's the same fuzz-faced mafia underling that Chuuya brought along to the safehouse – or, well, safehouses -- that looks like his miniature version as well. Same shade of red hair even if Chuuya's is longer… and shinier, same stature, and same workplace. The main difference is that this one here takes himself awfully serious for a grunt.

"I can't do that," he tells Dazai and even raises his chin ever so slightly. Disgusting. "I have orders to escort you to the boss."

"The boss changed his mind and said you can go now." Dazai's fingers flick in the direction that is farthest away from him. "Goodbye."

"I… I have to confirm that first –"

"Do you really think *the boss* has enough time to answer every single one of your stupid questions?"

Karma's mouth flutters open and shut again. The poor, helpless creature is thinking so hard Dazai expects to see his brain explode from overheating any second now.

"Good choice," he says before Karma has even made one, and totters up the stairs of the building.

The entrance is bustling with activity, people of all shapes and colors coming and leaving, phones ringing, sounds mixing into one cocktail of white noise that Dazai blends out as he locates the elevators and sets off towards them. A lot of people would probably be surprised at all the criminal activities going on behind this commercial, business façade. Dazai is surprised to see so many civilians there. In his memory, everything here was dark and grim. No one who entered the mafia's nest did it because they wanted a pedicure.

Too many other people squeeze themselves into the elevator and push buttons like they are at the arcade, making the damn thing stop every few floors. Getting to the very top is a challenge in patience that Dazai overcomes by imagining all the different ways to ruin Chuuya's day.

After all, this is why he is here.

That, and because Odasaku has been out on personal business for the last few hours and Dazai's chronic boredom is coming to a painful peak. And because there is something off about Chuuya that he still hasn't managed to pinpoint exactly. And because Chuuya radioed him every day and it makes him as tempting and as poisonous as the last

dose of a drug addict's heroin. Dazai wants to cleanse his veins until every last trace of him is finally gone and he stops feeling so empty without him. Dazai wants to gorge on him until it's all he can feel inside, until the blood pumping into his heart is so sickly sweet that his cardiac muscle tissues give out.

The electric doors slide open to reveal four tall, blank-faced guards in front of it. Dazai flashes them his most dazzling grin and announces, "I'm here to see Chuuya." Except that when he attempts to follow up on his words, the human wall promptly and impolitely stops him.

"ID?" one of them demands.

Dazai has no such thing. The only things hiding in the pockets of the dark-brown coat, that he found hanging in the closet, are a handful of bobby pins, his phone and lip balm to keep his lips nice and juicy. "Look," he relents with an understanding nod, "I know you're following orders but the boss, the one who gave you the orders, will want to see me as soon as possible and without any hiccups. I'm Dazai Osamu, by the way. I'm sure you've already heard of me. Now excuse me but I have to go thr—"

An undignified noise slips out of him as one of these brutes grabs him by the back of his collar and all but lifts him off the ground like he is someone's misbehaving cat that knocked over an expensive vase while another one starts *groping* him.

"I hope you realize this is the last thing you'll ever do," he hisses and claws at their pawing hands like a feral feline – if they are going to treat him like one, then he will act like one, too. "Stop touching me! I will –"

"Dazai?" And then. "Let him go."

All at once, the intrusion of his privacy stops and he lands on the ground again, the incompetent underlings parting and bowing their heads to make way for their boss who makes his way here with long, powerful strides and one glaringly blue eye that's narrowed.

"Finally," Dazai huffs and dusts off the phantom touch of someone's hands on him. "Your subordinates are useless and disobedient. You should execute them right on the spot."

Chuuya has the audacity to snort before he invites Dazai to follow him with a hand on his back. "My subordinates are doing their job and you are an unknown, loud brat who thinks he can do whatever he wants.

Where is Karma? He was supposed to identify you."

Oh.

"Gone," Dazai lies. "See? Useless."

"Stop making their lives harder than necessary," Chuuya tells him in a chiding tone.

"Stop having incompetent underlings then."

Chuuya lets out a breath next to him, pulling Dazai's gaze to him like a magnet. Despite the sigh, despite the hideous eye patch and the even more hideous tattoos, despite the ruthless winter air outside, his expression is light and breezy, his mouth relaxed. "I was surprised when I heard that you were coming." He has to turn his head more fully now to look at Dazai. "Any special occasion or are you just here to burn my heart out?"

"Why don't you figure it out yourself?" Then Dazai grimaces mockingly. "Oh, wait, right. You're not really good at that considering you didn't even think of calling when no one answered your radio calls for five months."

"Fine." Chuuya's tone is less Mr. cool and casual and more spitfire-that's-ready-to-blow. "I'm busy, though, so if there's something you want from me, you've got to make it quick."

They arrive in the office just in perfect time for Dazai to declare, "I'm here to take back what's mine."

Chuuya pauses in the middle of the grand room to slowly spin around.

"The throne. I want the throne," Dazai explains softly. "Just in case you're not following."

Chuuya's head cocks slightly. "Is that so?"

"I'm the last living heir of my father's empire." Dazai strolls over to him with his arms innocently folded behind his back before lifting one and bringing his hand up to Chuuya's cheek, letting his fingertips trail over the marking. "You… Mori… you were just warming the seat for me to come back and reclaim what's mine by blood."

Chuuya's own hand stops Dazai's from wandering any further as he

looks him in the eyes. “You want it? Then take it. Fight for it. Try to kill me if you think you’re up to it. I love a good match.” The words are striking opposites of the way he touches Dazai: soft, gentle, almost worshipping. “But I’m not going to give you anything that you don’t actually deserve. Your blood means nothing to me.”

Very eloquent. And feisty. Dazai would be bummed out if his only reason for this declaration hadn’t been to have an excuse to touch Chuuya from the start.

He smiles faintly. “Sounds wonderful to me. Who wouldn’t want to keep a relationship burning?”

Chuuya’s confidence wanes ever so slightly. He tries to step back, but Dazai hasn’t soaked up enough of him yet, so he brings his other hand into play, thumbing at the edge of his stupid pirate cosplay. As expected, the stiffness that follows keeps Chuuya right here in his space, close enough that his crackling flames will make Dazai melt into a puddle of dirty, used up water if he comes anywhere nearer.

“What’s wrong with your eye?”

“What’s wrong with every person that wears eye patches?” Chuuya snaps. “I thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”

“Well, I figured I didn’t have the right to jump to conclusions with my bandages, but if you insist.”

Granted, what Chuuya said was *not* an invitation to tug at the eyepatch. Dazai is well-aware of that. It just doesn’t stop him from doing it either. Aside from feeling Chuuya up, Dazai did come here to irritate him into submission, and based on the heavy intake of breath and murderous glare in Chuuya’s healthy eye, he accomplishes that just fine when the patch slips over his brow and reveals nothing but blank whiteness.

Chuuya wants to turn away, wants to cover it up again, and probably wants to pummel Dazai all the way into tomorrow – it’s visible in every locked muscle in his body. But he forces himself not to do any of it. Dazai can see that too.

“People usually wear eye patches because they don’t have any eye left at all,” Dazai says after having his fill, and letting Chuuya to do as he pleases as he retreats into frost and snow. “Your eye’s just white. So technically –”

“Are you actually here for something or is this it?” Chuuya cuts in, eye patch back in his place and the mafia boss posture stitched back together.

“What, it’s all work, no play now?” It’s supposed to sound teasing and annoying. Instead, a few miserable notes of disappointment sneak in. Chuuya used to listen to him talk about nothing for hours, and even though he made sure to voice his complaints, they were always uttered with a grin and a fond gleam in his eyes that overshadowed the words that came out of his mouth.

Dazai decides he doesn’t want to hear the answer. “I told you. I’m going to help you fix the mess with the special division forces. So, we can all finally move on with our lives of course.”

Chuuya’s voice lacks any humor when he echoes, “of course.”

Dazai inclines his head, asking a silent *well…?*

“All right,” is the muttered answer, “follow me.”

The office has changed, too – not only from the childhood picture Dazai remembers but from the last time he was here, sitting at a long table that isn’t here anymore and having a chat with the man that killed his father… who isn’t here anymore either. Chuuya seems to have a habit of letting things vanish. Perhaps he has black holes instead of hands.

The desk isn’t their destination, that much becomes clear when Chuuya strides past it, but Dazai decides to make a stop there anyway, scanning documents and folders and letting them flop down to the carpeted floor when they don’t reveal anything interesting.

“Oi,” Chuuya snaps.

The sound of mechanical buzzing finally lures Dazai over, his brows rising as he watches the wall on the side lift to reveal another room. This one is all metal and purpose: computer screens, maps, intercoms and phones, and walls plastered with information that the underworld would kill for.

“You didn’t know this exists?”

Dazai clicks his tongue before inviting himself into the port mafia’s chamber of secrets. “Do you think my father would let a child play around in his strategy room?”

“How should I know? It’s not like you ever talked to me about it.”

“Funny, I seem to remember you saying once that I didn’t have to tell you things, but I guess it’s more convenient to leave that part out, right?” His eyes follow his finger tapping random words and names on the screen that are most likely code for super-secret mafia missions, so he doesn’t see Chuuya or his reaction, but he certainly feels it. He emits his frustration like tangible flames pouring off his body. Dazai wonders whether his skin could take that away, too. One touch to nullify such grand emotions.

“I meant things that had nothing to do with me. Not shit that could have had affected my life, yours, and everyone else’s.” By the end of the sentence, Chuuya’s voice loses its heat and mellows out into something tired and worn out. There is nothing more to nullify when he comes up next to Dazai, slaps his hand away, and accesses some heavily secured folder. “Here’s what we have.”

The screen is starting to look interesting, but so is Chuuya. “And you are just going to let some outsider read all this classified information?”

“What, planning to betray us, Dazai?” Chuuya asks, mirroring the cocked thing and gleam and all.

“It does have a nice ring to it, don’t you think? The port mafia’s boss betrayed by a good-for-nothing literature student.”

“I think you care more about Oda than you hate me, so yeah.” Chuuya breaks the eye contact to slide his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “I’m just going to let you read all this.”

That edge of bitterness in his tone makes Dazai’s stomach curl in delight. It’s only a temporary high though, the reminder that Chuuya not only has his own people that he now cares about more, but also that he has slept with those people making Dazai plummet back to the ground.

People like Fyodor Dostoevsky who aren’t even people but dirty, little sewer rats.

A world in which that creature got his hands on *his* Chuuya and shamelessly *stole* him from Dazai just like he stole every single one of his toys back then is a wrong one.

For that reason alone, the port mafia should go ahead and find the

book because Dazai has quite a few things he would like to fix about his reality, starting with erasing the rat's existence.

Unfortunately, the longer he absorbs the information from the files, the more obvious it becomes that Chuuya has no intention at all to get the book – which he already proclaimed loud and clear two weeks ago, but that is what every leader of a crime syndicate says before doing the same exact thing.

"Chuuya."

"…"

"Chuuya."

"…"

Dazai steals one of the pencils lying around on the desk between them and catapults it into Chuuya's sphere. The man catches it without even having to look up, but at least it makes him lift his head long enough to say, *"what?"*

"Why are you so insistent on not finding the book?"

"Because I don't feel like messing with the balance of the universe 's why."

"But it's hindering you from making any actual progress," Dazai says. "You are dependent on the special division to make their move first. That makes you weak. When you could just use what you have to both find the book and stop the special division from finding it first."

"There's a reason why the book is so hard to find and it's not hard to figure out why." Chuuya scribbles his signature on the paper in front of him with brisk, rough movements. "Say I find the damn thing and don't use it. What about the next boss, huh? Do you think everyone that comes after me will just sit back and let a thing like that exist?"

"Then destroy it."

"No one even knows what it is. I'm not touching it whether to use or to destroy it."

"What if *I* do?"

Chuuya slowly drags his eyes back to Dazai. "You know what the book is?"

“I might.” Shrugging, he folds his hands together and rests his chin on them. “My father didn’t use to tell me much, but that doesn’t mean that I didn’t overhear a lot of things.”

“You’re lying.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Do you really want to risk the chance of not using my pretty little head to your advantage?”

“Your pretty little head shouldn’t mess with something like that either,” Chuuya grunts out after a moment, snapping the folder shut with much ado. “I said I’m not going to look for it and that’s the end of it. If that means that I’ll have to crush every idiot that comes here looking for it, I’ll fucking do it.”

Dazai lets his cheek drop to the table. “Chuuya is so boring.”

The only response is a dry huff.

“Would you change your mind if I told you I would stop hating you in return?” Curious, he lifts his eyes to see Chuuya’s reaction, but again it’s just a dry, uninteresting scowl.

“Yeah, like that will happen.”

“Why not? I forgave people for worse things.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re so fucked in the head.”

“Hm.” Dazai returns to his cave of skin-warmth and incomplete darkness. “You’re right. To earn my forgiveness, you will have to let me die and you still can’t stand to see that happen.”

“Right. So sorry for wanting you alive. What a horrible monster I am.”

“Letting me die would have been the easier choice. You would have been sad, but it would have been temporary. The pain I will bring you from now on until the rest of your days is never-ending.”

“Thought you were here to help, not to wax angsty poetics.”

“I don’t see a point in helping you make stupid decisions just because of some false moral compass you carry with you. You’re mafia, Chuuya. Do you really think there is still a place in heaven for you? Or in paradise? Or whatever good afterlife you believe in?”

“I know *exactly* where I’ll end up, Dazai,” Chuuya snaps, and the

tremors reverberating through his voice reveal that Dazai has located a sore spot. Bingo. “Doesn’t mean I want to drag down the rest of the world with me.”

Dazai unfolds himself to sit up and watch the mighty mafia boss. What a sight he makes in his dashing clothes and colors and his one eye that is still more blazing than anyone else’s. And yet there is such a small, human desire aflame in him. “What do you think is worse, all the blood on your hands from the atrocities that you committed in the name of the mafia or all the atrocities you will let your subordinates commit for you?”

Chuuya looks back at him with a cold glare.

“Or maybe it’s that pride of yours? According to Catholicism it’s a deadly sin, you know.”

“Shut up, Dazai.”

“Personally, I think the worst thing about you is that you’re a follower.” Dazai feels his own eyes widen with every new syllable that comes gushing out of him like water, filling the air with poison. “You’re supposed to be the new mafia boss, yet you’re still letting people pull your strings like you’re their little puppet. You really believe that Fyodor is here to help to you? Don’t you think it’s odd that he was supposed to fix the radio and then didn’t? Isn’t it embarrassing to still be a good little follower doing everything that people want you to do all the time? And –”

Chuuya slams his fist into the table, breaking it in half. The only reason the debris doesn’t crush Dazai’s thighs is because the same red glow that just caused the damage is also now holding the pieces afloat.

“You want to list of all the things that are wrong about me? Fine! But how about we talk about you for a second too? How’d you like that, huh?”

Rolling away from the broken desk, Dazai swings one leg over the other and lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. “Go ahead. I’m *so* interested in hearing all about it.”

“Well, how about that you would rather eat your own fist than tell the people in your life what’s on your mind? I mean do you even know how communication works? It’s not like anyone is forcing you to pretend to be a therapy patient. We just want some fucking piece of

truth that isn't a sarcastic remark wrapped in ten layers of meanings!"

Swinging his arm through the air, Chuuya lets the desk drop to the ground before stepping over it like it's a puddle of rainy water.

"Or, how about that you're so resentful and unwilling to accept that others have human flaws just like everyone else that you think picking a fight every 10 minutes is going to make you feel better?" He takes another step forward, making Dazai narrow his eyes. "I mean, for fuck's sake, Dazai. I know that I've made mistakes and I'm not trying to get off scot-free, but you're acting like a fucking *child*."

Then Chuuya's in front of him and before Dazai can roll away, his foot swings forward and pins the chair to the wall behind them. Chuuya has never been particularly tall, but now it's Dazai who has to look up at him, albeit with a carefully built unimpressed stare. "Or, let's talk about the fact that *you* forced yourself into my life, *you* made me care about you, *you* made me fucking *fall* for you, and then you have the gall to be mad at me for wanting to keep you alive and safe and healthy!

"Lord knows I know a thing or two about self-destructive tendencies. I get it, okay? But you can't waltz into people's lives and then punish them for caring! I don't care whether that makes me an awful person or patronizing or whatever it is that you want to call me. Because you're here instead of being buried in some graveyard where all the other people I once used to care about are now lying! You're *here*, and I'm glad, I'm fucking ecstatic that you are, so fuck you for trying to take that away from me!"

Dazai leans forward, letting all the bitter poison in his veins drip into his eyes. "You *still* don't get it."

"Then make me understand it!" Chuuya snaps.

So Dazai grabs a fistful of his shirt and yanks him down to crush their lips together.

He hears Chuuya's surprised noise vibrate against his mouth; Dazai drinks it up and lets it melt on his tongue as Chuuya's unyielding lips start returning each kiss with even more heat. A knee comes down between Dazai's thighs so Chuuya can brace himself and push forward, his fingers grabbing his face to wrestle for control.

But Dazai has nothing more to give of himself.

All he can do is take.

And he doesn't want to feel how much illogical tenderness is in Chuuya, doesn't want his chest begging him to lean into it and find out what sweetness tastes like. Dazai just wants to ruin him so Chuuya will never be able to ruin him first. Not again.

Dazai's teeth set into his lip, just as cruel and demanding as the hand that's still fisted in his shirt, and Chuuya's breath hiccups, trying to get him back or lean away or do something but Dazai won't let him this time –

Until an even crueler hand slides into his hair and yanks him back.

"Are you trying to –" Chuuya's chest heaves with heavy breaths against Dazai. "– fucking gnaw my lips off?"

Dazai blinks hazily, eyelids half shut. "So, what if I am?"

"This is just another fucked up plan of yours to get revenge, isn't it?"

"I'm isolated from half of the city with only Odasaku to keep me company," he mutters, "so if you don't want me to climb into his bed tonight, then I suggest you take what you can get while you still can."

Chuuya's expression leaks discomfort, but he's only human, and apparently with a weak spot for other human disasters like Dazai. He ends up slotting their mouths back together because of course he does, the grip in his hair softening even though the kiss remains firm, rough, and ragged, their lips never lingering long enough to leave space for anything other than blistering physical attraction.

Hands slide down to Dazai's shoulders, pushing him back to make space for two people on the chair – that won't happen, though. Chuuya exhales a sharp grunt when Dazai pushes his stupid knee away and instantly brings it back which results in a breathless wrestling match in-between kisses that grow more competitive to match the flow of their bodies.

"I don't want to do this on this stupid chair," Dazai ends up hissing out at some point before he finally gets a grip mean enough to bring both of them half-tumbling to the floor. Knees spread around the width of Chuuya's hips, Dazai surges forward and shuts Chuuya up with a kiss so he doesn't have to hear the complaint that was sure to tumble out.

“Here,” Dazai smears against his mouth, pressing Chuuya’s arms down. “I like this better.”

To Chuuya’s credit, he doesn’t bitch about the change of scenery or the fact that Dazai is using him as his cushioned carpet on the cold, hard floor of a strategy room. But that does in no way mean that he dips his flag. The opposite. He waves it even harder, just not with his arms. Instead, he concentrates his forces on his mouth. Specifically: on undoing Dazai with it.

Every slide of lips, every slick brush of tongue, and every change of angle, no matter how small, leaves Dazai’s insides hurtling from side to side like he is a passenger on a frail little ship and Chuuya the unforgiving ocean, summoning wave after dizzying wave. Because while Dazai was busy learning how to kiss at all back then, Chuuya used that time to memorize all the spots and ticks that make Dazai’s lungs stutter, so that now, he has an unfair advantage – even though Dazai doesn’t have to take lessons in kissing anymore.

The world spins. Dazai feels seasick. Drowning seems like a wonderful way to die.

And –

“Wow, seriously?”

The intruding voice of Yosano Akiko pops the bubble of water and sea-salt and leaves Dazai drenched in the aftermath. Muscles stiff, he slinks away from his very own personal suicide potion while Chuuya just lets out a heavy breath and rubs his one eye with his fist, not nearly as uncomfortable to have been caught red-handed.

“An entire tower full of furniture and you’re rolling around on the floor?” Yosano wants to know.

Sitting up, Chuuya shoots her an unimpressed stare over his shoulder. “Is there something you want? I’m *busy*.”

“Yes, I can see that.” Her eyes flicker from him to Dazai, who has taken to dusting off his sweater because his legs still feel too wobbly to attempt standing up right now, then they finally settle back on Chuuya. “There’s a situation. You’re needed.”

That elicits another sigh from Chuuya, one that sounds a lot like he is regretting his past life decisions. In the end, he still pulls himself to his feet, grumbling something about never catching a break. He pauses on

his way out though, and the reason for that is the abandoned animal at the side of the road, too caught up in the impending doom of his world to chase after the owner who left it behind.

“Are you coming?”

Dazai blinks dumbly. A situation where the boss of the mafia is needed usually spells trouble, and Chuuya has drawn a line in the sand a while ago to keep Dazai away from that side of it. Seems odd to trample over it now, especially after Chuuya’s declaration ten minutes ago.

“What if it’s dangerous?”

Chuuya exhales a tired sign. “Everything in this world can be dangerous. Get the fuck up.”

And so Dazai gets to his feet, unsteady and swaying a little, but standing.

After a more or less successful day at the headquarters, Chuuya offers Dazai a ride home and is only slightly surprised to hear him say *yes* and shrug like he hasn’t dramatically declared to destroy him just a week ago. Mostly because most of his actions of revenge were petty little grievances like shoving folders off Chuuya’s desk, spilling coffee over his iPad, baiting him into arguments, and oh yeah, *kissing him on the floor*.

Dazai’s not going to forgive or forget any time soon, that much is clear.

But he is also not planning to *leave* any time soon.

And *that* lets Chuuya wear a tentative smile as he thunders over Yokohama’s after-hours streets, one that’s sparked by the timid rays of sunshine emerging from behind the storm of the last cold nine months… even if the only reason Dazai hasn’t attempted to assassinate him behind the wheel yet is that they haven’t been talking since they left the base.

“So,” Chuuya eventually is the first to say, fingers tapping a pulsing beat against the steering wheel, “any plans for the week?”

He sees Dazai curl his lips from the corner of his eye, arms folding over his jutted-out chest. “Well, obviously I’ll have my hands full

coming up with a strategy against the special division since you decided to sit back and twiddle your thumbs."

"If you hadn't been so busy complaining about every single thing I do, you'd have seen that we have been doing anything but that."

"Then I guess all of you have been doing an epically shit job the entire time as I'm still confined to the four walls of my apartment, cut off from the rest of my former life, and forced to spend time with you just to be able to walk the streets of the city without getting arrested for crimes I didn't commit." Dazai puffs out a sullen breath. "You're acting dense on purpose to keep me tied to you, aren't you? How typical of you, Chuuya. Ever the tyrant."

Sighing, Chuuya reaches into his pocket to slide out a pack of cigarettes, fishing out one stick one-handedly before planting it between his lips. His brows furrow when he can't feel the lighter that he always keeps on him.

"Looking for this?" Dazai drawls, holding up the missing object in question.

"When did you steal that?" Chuuya grumbles and reaches for it only for the little bastard to hold it away from him with a condescending tut. His unimpressed stare bleeds into a scowl. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Dazai says and promptly steals the cigarette out of his mouth too, putting it between his own lips and lighting it up.

Well, Chuuya doesn't mind sharing, so as long –

"Oi! What the hell?!"

"Hm?" Dazai's lashes bat innocently as he lets the window slide up again a*fter opening it in the first place to chuck out both cigarette and lighter*. "Is something the matter?"

Fingers curling around the steering wheel, Chuuya lets out a deep breath. Then another. Reminding himself that somewhere under this façade of *most annoying shit in the world*, there is someone that he once would have killed to spend just five more minutes with. Someone who's hurt and who acts like a little bitch about it but is hurt, nonetheless.

"So you're sticking around, is what you're saying," Chuuya forces out instead of rising to the bait. "Should I prepare for everyday visits from

you now or is that just a weekend thing?"

"Where is the fun in telling you that? I'll visit when I want to."

Another deep in- and exhale. "Right."

Except Dazai immediately follows it up with, "when I want to *and* probably tomorrow."

"Okay."

"Because my roommate slash best friend is busy catching up with his girlfriend and her rat of a… what even are they? Lovers? Partners? Friends with benefits? Kinksters?" Chuuya feels his eyes sway to him. "What were *you?"*

"Nothing," Chuuya says with a shrug. "I told you. It was just sex."

"Right. Just sex for nine months. How very reassuring to hear."

"It wasn't nine months… just six or something like that."

"Just six!" Dazai echoes, flapping his hands through the air. "That makes it so much better. Six months of you –" A loud breath cuts into his speech. "Of you… fucking the person that I hate most in the world. And for six months only! Great!"

Chuuya waits until he stops the car in front of the building complex where Dazai resides before he turns to him and speaks. "I didn't know you were coming back. And it *was* just –"

"You didn't *want* to know whether I would be coming back."

Sick of hearing that accusation over and over, he shakes his head. "I wanted to, or I wouldn't have bothered to spend every single day trying to reach you. I made a mistake, I'm not denying that but I *wanted* to know, and I *wanted* you to come back, and it was just meaningless sex to somehow get through the night without feeling like shit in the morning!"

"Because life as a mafia boss must have been so hard on you, right?" Dazai's eyes flash with a fierce white light. "Can't imagine how difficult it must have been to wake up in a comfortable bed with all that *money* you now have even more of and all these people dying to worship the ground you walk on. Poor Chuuya. My deepest condolences for all the hardships you had to endure because of a

decision *you* made."

I was dead, it wants to spout out of Chuuya. *I was torn apart from the inside, and it took me* weeks *to even stand on my own feet again*. And it's not an excuse, not something he ever wants to say to get away with shitty behavior, but it happened and it's still happening, so yeah, he got what little enjoyment he could still get out of his life but –

But he can't say any of that.

Because this is not the time nor the place to drop this bomb. Or ever. Whether it's life as the head of the port mafia or life in a body that's slowly dying, Chuuya is never going to grow old and wrinkly and die a natural death. That was never in the cards for him anyway.

He rubs a tired hand over his face. "Think what you want, Dazai. Fact is that the only reason you're so bothered is that you still care. You can come up with a thousand reasons for hating me, but none of them will make it any less true."

"I can do both at the same time," Dazai's voice mutters. "I'm versatile like that."

Chuuya counts cracks in the wall in front of them.

"Odasaku still isn't home."

Brows raised, he slides his gaze to Dazai. "That an invitation or an observation?"

"Don't start playing stupid now," is the sneered reply. "It's not a cute look." He opens the door and climbs out of the car, slamming it behind him, yet still shooting Chuuya an expectant stare from the outside.

Well.

Chuuya supposes there is nothing speaking against picking up where they last left off.

On the floor. Fingers tugging at clothes. Mouths stealing air from each other.

He climbs out of the car, taking a cautious glance around their surroundings before following Dazai inside the building's foyer. One of the employees working at the shop is currently watering the plans

in the small lobby, though she enthusiastically greets them with a bow and a wave of her hand when they enter.

“Lovely Minako-chan,” Dazai murmurs as he drags his feet up the stairs. “How did you decide who to post in the shop anyway? She is surprisingly well-versed in books for a mafioso.”

“I read and I’m a mafioso,” Chuuya points out. “Weren’t you just preaching about versatility?”

Judging by the little *tsk* that slips out of Dazai when he unlocks the doors, he doesn’t appreciate that reminder. He punches in the security code, then kicks off his shoes with a huff like they have personally wronged him and lets them fly halfway through the apartment. “Your taste in books is atrocious. Minako’s is at least somewhat decent.”

“She was a literature professor before she joined the mafia. I figured she’d actually appreciate the change in scenery instead of just doing it because I asked her to.”

“That is a rather drastic change in career,” Dazai comments on his way to the kitchen where he grabs himself a can of… fruit wine and pops it open. “I can relate. Thanks to Chuuya, I went from studying literature to being a wanted criminal on the run.” Sighing contently, he lets him flop down on a chair, one hand already reaching for a half-opened cereal box that must have been left on the table before either he or Oda left. “I guess that’s why I like her so much!”

“*Mafia heir* to literature student to criminal on the run,” Chuuya corrects with a pointed smile, leaning back against the island that separates the kitchen from the hallway and the living room. “But you love leaving out that part.”

Dazai glares at him over the rim of his drink. “I was born into that and left when I was still a child. I have omitted that chapter of my life because it didn’t matter. I figured you of all people would understand, but I guess I was wrong.”

“I would have understood if you had ever bothered to tell me.”

“Like you’re so honest,” Dazai shoots back without waiting a single beat.

“I’m honest about the things that affect you. About things that *matter.”*

“If it wasn’t for me, you would have never even admitted that you saw

me as something more than the sad little freeloader that you let live with you out of pity! You liked me and kept quiet about that! That didn't matter?"

Taken aback by the sudden and steep swerve into a completely different direction, Chuuya blinks. Then his head tilts. "I was going to tell you. I even asked you out. You were the one who blew me off…" As satisfying as it is to watch Dazai's mouth clamp shut in silent defeat, it's not making any more sense. "… not that it even matters. How is that relevant?!"

"It's relevant because you keep preaching about honesty when you constantly hide things yourself." Dazai jabs a finger in his direction. "You're a hypocrite, Chuuya. And I *hate* hypocrites. They make me sick. *You* make me sick."

"Anything else?" Chuuya mutters. "Because I've already heard this before."

"Every time I look at you, I remember why I left the mafia. I hated everyone there too."

"Yeah, then why did you try so fucking hard to join?"

"You're so incredibly stupid that I'm surprised you're still alive. How the hell is the organization still standing with the most idiotic, clueless, and oblivious man on the entire planet leading it?"

Chuuya's fingers slowly clench around themselves. "Well, the organization has been just fine, so apparently I'm not as fucking stupid as you think I am."

"Really, though?" Dazai says in that aggravating mock-voice of his. "Or was it maybe the fact that you had help the entire time?" He makes a show of gasping and clutching a hand to his chest. "Wait, I just figured it all out. The reason why you let Fyodor into your bed. It was so he could take over the job for you, wasn't it? Or maybe… or maybe you didn't even manage to think that far. Maybe this entire time he has not only been fucking you, but your organization too. Wow, Chuuya. Congratulations. You must be so proud of all your accomplishments."

"Fuck you, Dazai."

"What, sore topic? I can imagine."

"*No*, fuck you for being too damn stubborn to admit that you're hurt and angry. You want to call me stupid and dumb while you're sitting here provoking fights like a goddamn child that doesn't know how to handle emotions and throw a temper tantrum instead? Go ahead. Suit yourself. But I'm too old for this bullshit."

"Is that why you sent me away then?" Dazai asks, simply ignoring the rest. "Because you think I'm a child that needs your protection and holy guidance?"

"I sent you away because Mori would have ruined you," he snaps.

"*You* ruined me!" Dazai exclaims and flings the can at him, the volume and depth of his voice as shocking as it is fascinating, the can not so much even if Chuuya effortlessly dodges it. It lands somewhere on the floor and judging by the puddle that forms around it, it wasn't even empty. "You acted like you cared, like you were different, like there was actually something in life worth waking up for, and then you *left!* You made me care and then you just abandoned me because I didn't tell you where I came from!"

"It's not like I fucking kidnapped you out of your dorms and forced you into my life! You broke into my apartment knowing exactly who I worked for! You –"

"Because I wanted to die!"

"I know!" Chuuya shouts back. "You always want to die, Dazai! That's the fucking problem. You accuse me of leaving you when you were the one who left in the first place. I asked you to stay out of the mafia and yet you somehow managed to get yourself a job there anyway. You say that I forced you to care about life, but did you really care about living when you had to manipulate Mori into recruiting you just to *feel* something? That's not living. That's looking for a way out without actually pulling the fucking trigger."

Dazai stares back at him unblinkingly, the only twitch on his face is the way he chews on his cheek.

"I care about the people in my life," Chuuya says again with less heat behind the words this time, just dreary exhaustion. "You can't force yourself into my world and then expect me not to care about you. It doesn't work like that. *I* don't work like that."

"See, that's the thing," Dazai murmurs. "You're just so unbelievably stupid."

“I’m not listening to th—”

“Because if you would actually hear me out *for once* in your short-legged life,” Dazai continues without so much as a flinch of hesitation, “you would have known that I let Mori find me to get *you* out of the mafia.” The smile that he flashes him doesn’t reach his eyes. “But sure, go ahead and pat yourself on the shoulder for saving poor little me from killing myself.”

“Get me out?” Chuuya echoes after a moment.

“Yes, you goddamn turd-brain. Get you out.”

“What, you thought replacing me with you would make me happy somehow?” Dazai’s indolent sigh makes Chuuya push away from the counter. “No, really. Explain it to me.”

“I would have gotten us both out. You once told me that it was too late for you, but it wasn’t. It’s never too late. I was born into this business, and I still got out. I guess I wanted to give the same chance at that.” Dazai exhales a wry huff. “Jokes on me. Now you’ll die in that tower just like every other boss before you.”

The thought of escaping the port mafia together shoots an odd sensation down Chuuya’s spine and presses his butt to sit down on the other chair as a living, breathing déjà vu crawls through his skin. He used to dream of it. A life outside this world. A life in the daylight. A boring, mundane civilian life.

“So you’re saying that your plan was for us… to be both on the run together…” He can’t help but crack a lopsided grin. “The thing you can’t stop complaining about?”

Dazai pointedly looks away. “We could have run away from the mafia a long time before that too. My plan was to squeeze out something so important from your boss that he would have eventually have no choice but to let us both go without a scratch. We wouldn’t have been on the run. We would have been *free.”*

But the reason why Chuuya stomped out this fantasy years ago already is that it’s a pipe dream. That’s all it is. And the only thing it does is give you false hope, making the fall even harder.

“Men like Mori don’t just let people walk away, Dazai. You either live as a mafioso or die as a traitor. No in-betweens.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I do know that,” he says. “I’ve lived through enough of friends, of co-workers that I talked to every day dying with a bullet through their head to know that it doesn’t work like that.”

“Were any of them the son of a former boss?”

Chuuya meets his gaze but doesn’t speak.

“You still can’t admit it,” Dazai continues. “Even now. You keep saying that you know that you made a mistake, but you don’t think it was. If you had just listened – if you had just given me *one* chance to speak so we could work together, then maybe we wouldn’t be here right now. But saving me -- poor helpless, innocent Dazai, was so much more important to you.”

“I know that you’re not helple—"

“Then act like it!” Snarling softly under his breath, Dazai jumps up from the chair and starts putting away dishes, both rinsed and dirty ones. “You’re holding something back, Chuuya. You and I both know it. And until you spit it out, I will be the pebble in your shoes that you won’t be able to shake no matter how hard you try.”

Chuuya watches him work aggressively. It’s no surprise that Dazai has already sniffed out the unspoken words buried inside his chest. He’s always had an eye for details with that brain of his. But he wouldn’t be asking Chuuya outright about it if he knew what exactly it is that he has been keeping locked away.

“We haven’t seen each other in almost a year,” he decides to say for now. “Of course there are things you don’t know. Doesn’t mean I’m holding back because I think you’re innocent.”

“What things?”

Pausing, Chuuya taps his finger against the table surface.

“What things?” Dazai demands, head swiveling around to glare at him.

It’s amazing, and maybe a little embarrassing, how small the scrutiny of those eyes manages to make Chuuya feel. He’s arguably one of the most powerful people in Yokohama right now, and his heart starts stumbling over itself just because Dazai looks at him.

God.

“I had to fight one of my executives…?”

Dazai tilts his head, clearly not seeing any relevance which is exactly Chuuya’s point.

“See?” he says, slapping his hand on the table. “It’s not important to you. Why would I tell you that?”

But the only thing Dazai says is, “now tell me what’s actually swirling through that head of yours.”

Damn it.

“I guess I have been through a… handful of assassination attempts,” Chuuya admits. “And it got close more than once. Is that what you want to hear? Because I can tell you all about how I was poisoned and drugged and almost electrocuted to death, but it’s not going to make you any less angry.”

It’s only a half-truth. A half-lie. But no matter how hard Dazai tries to provoke him into admitting the actual reason that kept him so occupied during the last nine months that he made the mistake of not trying fucking harder to reach out – Chuuya won’t give him that. Not when he can barely stand *thinking* about it himself.

This time, Dazai takes his admission into consideration, letting the words float around in his head and taste them in his mouth before he eventually asks, “did it hurt?”

“What exactly?” Chuuya mutters. “The person who did it was very creative.”

“Dying. Did it hurt?”

And ironically enough, he can’t even say that he technically never died because he did. Over and over. Part of him is still dying every day, corruption eating away at him like a tiny parasite.

“Yeah. It hurt like hell.”

Dazai’s chest sags with a sigh. He grabs a glass and at least bothers to dry it off this time. “So it’s not peaceful?”

“No, it’s fucking not. It sucks. Hurts like shit. You of all people should try to avoid it for as long as possible and not –” He gestures vaguely,

not enough eloquent words in his vocabulary to describe Dazai's paradoxical fascination with death. "— lust after it like a cat in heat."

"Being curious is not the same as actually wanting it," Dazai murmurs, eyes locked on the cup in his hand.

"Not always, but sometimes it is. Is it really that different to be curious enough about dying and 'accidentally' die in the process rather than just killing yourself?"

"Of course there is a difference."

"Well, as someone who has been there more than I ever wanted to be, it's really not that fascinating. It hurts, it's lonely and it makes you powerless. It's part of life, and everyone goes through it, but it's not fucking worth it being interested in."

Dazai makes a small *humph* sound, and lets the silence linger. Maybe he's right and Chuuya is dumber than he thinks because he convinces himself into believing that this is it. Inquisition over.

As if Dazai would ever let him have the last word.

"Go on then," he prompts flatly.

"Seriously?" Chuuya can't help but bite out.

"Do I look like I'm joking? Tell me. Bear your fucking soul to me, Chuuya, so I can figure out if you're worth all these bothersome, suffocating emotions or not."

He sucks in a deep breath and rests his cheek against his hand. "This isn't just a safe house. I bought the building a few days after you left and planned to give it to you once you came back." The glass slips from Dazai's grip and shatters on the floor. Chuuya stares at it, then at Dazai, and tries to get up to clean it up, but Dazai stops him with a single finger, wordlessly forcing him to go on instead. So he tentatively does, keeping his eyes locked on Dazai's face the entire time. "Because… I really did believe you'd only be gone for a week or two. Because I wanted you to return. And I knew you'd hate me, I knew there would be a fight -- or lots of them, and I knew that it wouldn't be the way it was before, but I wanted you to come back anyway." He huffs out a small laugh. "I wanted you back the moment I watched Oda drive away."

Dazai waits for more but when nothing else comes out, he silently

nods to himself, reaches for another glass… and slam-dunks it against the floor.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Chuuya mutters under his breath, getting to his feet. “Dazai.”

But Dazai doesn’t listen. He takes a bowl this time, big enough for a salad, and flings it against the wall where it shatters with a deafening crash, echoing the pulse in Chuuya’s ears as he shoves the fragments on the floor out of the way with his ability, then jerks the sleeve of Dazai’s sweater until his dull, unfocused eyes finally dart to him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“What’s *not* wrong with me?” Dazai responds, his voice eerily high-pitched and thin. “Isn’t that what you keep telling me? That I’m broken and childish and –”

“I meant why the hell are you destroying your own kitchen?!”

“Because –” His chest rises and falls heavily. “Because there is this thing and it’s -- it’s eating me up from the inside out and if you don’t let me destroy something right now, I will attempt to make it go away with more drastic means that *you* won’t like, so –”

So…

At a loss for words – or what to do really, Chuuya steps aside and watches him fling open the cabinet and not even bother to take out the dishware one by one anymore. He lets all of it crash with one swoop of his arm.

But as someone who had to avoid catapulting himself into space by destroying a bunch of empty bottles, Chuuya is in no position to judge.

“God, I hate you,” Dazai exclaims, grabbing a pot and smashing it against the cabinet, destroying that, too. “I hate you so much for making me interested enough to make me stay! I hate you for giving me false expectations! I hate you for not giving me one more minute to explain! I hate you for – for making me feel like this! I hate feeling like this! It’s awful! Why would anyone willingly go through this?!”

(Oda twists the keys in the lock, opens the door, and pauses when he hears Dazai’s startlingly loud yelling, accompanied by a chorus of shattering glass. A moment later, Nakahara Chuuya’s voice joins the

racket.

Lips pressed together, Oda considers his options. Break up the fight, or accept Akiko's offer to stay for a few more hours after all?

More noises. More shouting. More glass shards.

Oda backs out of the apartment again. His hand reaches into his pocket to make a call.)

"Can I say something –"

"No, shut up!"

All Chuuya can do is lean back against the far wall and massage his temple, hoping that the headache that he can feel grow in the back of his skull won't get any worse. Given all the noise here though… he won't get that lucky.

"I hate – ouch!" Dazai yelps miserably, instantly moving back after trying to take a step forward, only to follow it up with another pained shriek. "Ouch, ouch, ouch, I hate pain too, god damn –"

Sighing, Chuuya lets the ungodly amount of shards scatter away before sliding over a chair with one leg and pushing Dazai to sit down on it as a waterfall of complaints streams out of his mouth. "At least put on fucking shoes before you decide to play hulk, or *matching socks*," Chuuya mutters, down to one knee on the floor so he can pick out the shards from Dazai's foot. "And you call *me* stupid."

"You *are* stupid," Dazai spits, not at all grateful for his service. "This is your fault too."

"You asked me to tell you the truth! What – stop moving for just one goddamn minute," Chuuya growls. "Or do you want this to get infected and then lose your foot?"

"It'll grow back!"

"You're not a lizard."

A loud sigh comes from above. "Yosano will grow it back."

"With that ability of yours? I doubt it."

"There are ways to use abilities on me. They involve me dying for a few seconds, but they exist."

Scowling, Chuuya glances up at him for a moment. “Do I want to find out how you know that?”

“No.” The foot in his hand shakes impatiently. “What are you, a foot fetishist? Hurry it up a little.”

“I’m not a…” Deeming it unnecessary to even finish this sentence, he simply focuses on picking out the last fragment of glass out of his sole. “I’d be fucking faster if you’d stop squirming.”

“Fucking faster,” he hears Dazai repeat under his breath. “You’re not even fucking slowly. You’re not fucking anything.”

With all of the shards gone, Chuuya softly lets his foot fall to the ground before dragging his gaze up to meet his. “If you want something from me, say it you goddamn *brat* because I’m not going to think about screwing you when you’re busy destroying your own kitchen.”

“Don’t tell me that rat managed to fuck all the kink out of you,” Dazai huffs softly and presses his foot against his knees until Chuuya scoldingly squeezes his ankle.

“What would you know about kink? Last I remember you nearly busted a nut just holding hands.”

Sucking in his cheeks, Dazai scowls. “That’s mean, Chuuya.”

He knows it is.

But somehow neither of them sounds all that upset by it.

“You reap what you sow.”

Dazai pushes him with his foot again, apparently keen on toppling him over and making him fall. But Chuuya is a master at balance, still is even after corruption. He has to be to remain sitting on the chair of the boss.

“So you’re not into angry sex? Hate sex? That kind of thing? *Really?*”

Chuuya has to bite back a nostalgic smile to avoid Dazai’s wrath, the question reminding him of their first few months together.

Meeting his gaze, Chuuya answers, “I’m not opposed to it.”

The truth is that fighting nowadays usually leaves him drained rather

than worked up. A year ago, sure. But these days, his body and mind operate on two contradictory levels. It's not ideal, but it still works.

Dazai stares back at him for a long, drawn-out moment before exhaling a shallow breath. "Even hearing your voice makes me angry," he hisses despite the way he relaxes his foot again Chuuya's knee and slowly lets it wander over his thigh instead. "Everything about you makes me want to shatter dishes. I was perfectly fine not having to deal with any of this, and you…" He emphasizes his words by pressing his toes against Chuuya's crotch. "You broke my brain."

Chuuya's eyes try to flutter closed with the pressure, but he forces them to stay open, that unguarded look of breathless resignation on Dazai's face too damn fascinating to miss it for anything. "Have you ever considered that the things you're feeling, the anger, the hurt, the fucking rage, are good things?"

"How is any of this even remotely good? I feel like I can't breathe. Like I'm…" He trails off and shoots Chuuya another glower. "Something this horrendous can't be good."

"It gets better with time. You learn to get used to it."

Dazai makes a face. "I will just have to learn to deal with it. That's your take on this?"

"Dazai," he chides, not able to hold back an amused smile this time. "Just… you know how everything seemed so much bigger and longer when you were young? It's because you were experiencing everything for the first time. The first scab on your knee felt like someone was cutting you apart. The first fight with your friends felt like the world was ending. You're hurting and because you *cared*, it now feels like the most painful thing in the world." Chuuya pauses to consider his next words. "I don't think I broke your brain. Your heart maybe." He grimaces. "But not your brain. The thing that's making you feel so shitty is the fact that you're actually letting yourself feel it. You're not broken, you're just… human."

For a long, silent moment Dazai just stares at him. Then his expression twists into an offended scowl. "This is by far the most stupid thing I have ever heard you say, and you say a lot of stupid things. It's like you *want* me to throw up."

Chuuya sighs. "I give up."

"You better. I will stuff my foot into your mouth if I have to hear

another word of this."

"I can think of something better to stuff my mouth with."

Dazai's eyes narrow.

Chuuya replies with a flat stare because they both know damn well that he was just talking about sex a minute ago.

"If you insist. Go ahead then. Anything to make you stop talking."

There are a thousand rebuttals in his head, and he lets all of them die on his tongue because this is at least something that he can give Dazai. Chuuya can't give him his title, can't give him the entire truth, can't give him a user manual on how to deal with his anger or a magical elixir that fixes the past, but Chuuya can give him *this*. Himself. His body. Something to use to feel better.

So he shuffles forward on his knees, never taking his eye off Dazai's stormy gaze that pins him to the floor beneath him, and places his hands on his thighs to gently spread them. The foot that's been pressing against his own dick falls away but that's okay. This isn't about him.

Dazai's chest rises more heavily than before when Chuuya lets his fingers wander to his pants, unbuttoning them and tugging down the zipper just enough to make this work. And try it as he might, the knowledge that this is s*till* fairly unfamiliar territory for Dazai, that getting sucked off still makes his throat work to swallow down nerves and hyper-sensitivity alike, sends a bolt of familiar heat down Chuuya's spine all over again. Because no matter how many things have changed over the last nine months, this hasn't. Dazai might have kissed someone else's lips and shared somebody else's body heat, but Chuuya's hands are still the only ones who have ever touched him like this.

And maybe he understands why his affair with Fyodor and Yosano bothers Dazai so much. Just sex or not, there is something gratifying about being the only one to touch someone like this, to make them feel good, to feel them shiver and gasp. Something intimate about it that only heightens with the knowledge that he might still just get to be the first and only person to break Dazai in all the pleasurable ways that exist.

Dazai's cock is already at half-mast when Chuuya pulls it out, must have been like this before he even suggested this, and he can't resist

the need to shoot him a smug glance. “If I insist, huh?”

“I thought I told you to *shut. up,”* Dazai hisses back, cruelly tangling his fingers in Chuuya’s hair in warning.

Well, Chuuya can do that. He can shut up.

He doesn’t bother to drag it out for longer than necessary, knows that it’s not what Dazai wants or needs right now, so after a few dry strokes that make Dazai’s cock twitch nonetheless, Chuuya places one hand on his thigh and slides his length into his mouth.

The sound that Dazai makes at that goes straight down to his own dick, throbbing in his pants. Chuuya ignores it in favor of focusing on the feel of Dazai in his mouth, hot-blooded, pulsing and getting harder with each breath that he forces out of his nose. Chuuya likes that, being able to feel him grow in the most intimate way possible. Dazai’s fingers curl and uncurl in his hair, almost like he’s not even aware that he’s doing it. Then another stuttered gasp slips out of him when Chuuya drags his lips up his length, keeping a tight suction around him, and down again, using one hand to keep a tight grip around his shaft in the meantime, thumb slipping lower to massage his balls.

“That’s so much better...” Dazai mutters above him with his voice half- wheezed out. “… than talking.”

It’s an ironic thing to say for someone who is *the* talker out of the two of them, but for now, Chuuya lets it slide, literally. He bobs his head up until his lips are only wrapped around the tip, suckling gently as his tongue dips into the slit, playing with it, then he raises his gaze to meet Dazai’s wide-blown eyes head-on. Shifting a little, he leans into his fingers, nodding as much as this position allows him to, giving Dazai the permission to do as he pleases.

He's not sure whether it’s the fact that their connection is still there despite everything that allows the message to come through so quickly, or whether Chuuya is just really good at letting his body language speak for himself, but Dazai blinks above him once, twice, three times before his Adam’s apple bobs with a gulp. Then his hand winds around the back of his skull and tentatively pushes him down on his cock, forcing him to go deeper. Chuuya goes willingly.

It's been long enough to make his head feel a little fuzzy with the constricted airflow into his lungs and the heady warmth that settles over him like dust when he gives up control and lets someone else take over for a while. Dazai’s close though. He can feel it from the

tiny, quick jerks of his hips fucking into his mouth, getting more and more fervent with each thrust, from the way his cock twitches every time Chuuya swallows around him with a groan, and from the wonderful sound of Dazai's breath, not only getting more shallow but louder, noisier. A breathless gasp here, a hiccupping whine there.

And then…

"Holy shit, there, there, right –" Chuuya's a mess around him, eyes burning hot with unshed tears, chin wet from spit that had nowhere else to go, and lips numb and bruised, but he doubles down when Dazai's voice cuts off into a series of soundless gasps, his fingers curling in Chuuya's hair but not pushing. Only his hips keep thrusting into his mouth, all sense of delicacy and tentativeness lost in the wind of chasing his orgasm.

Then the most garbled, beautiful noise rips out of him, and his cock spasms in Chuuya's mouth before spilling. Groaning in the back of his throat, he swallows like crazy, insistent on drawing out every last drop of his come, milking him dry, making him feel *good, better, anything but whatever the hell he has made Dazai feel in the last nine months.*

Chuuya only stops when Dazai's breathing transforms into an overstimulated whine, his fingers balled into a fist in the back of his hair to pry his mouth off him. The sudden rush of unrestricted air and emptiness make Chuuya rasp out a gasp of his own, even when he finds Dazai's gaze and holds it as his tongue darts out to make sure he didn't miss anything.

"God," Dazai says, sounding tired but satisfied, "you're a slut."

Chuuya can only roll his eyes, focusing on tucking Dazai's softened dick back into his pants and zipping them up. "You didn't mind getting sucked off by a slut." The only reply he gets is used-up air, so he looks back up at him. "Feeling better?"

"No." Dazai immediately sighs though, folding his arms over his chest and drawing his legs closer. "Yes. I don't know. I still feel like shattering dishes."

Chuuya pats his thigh before getting back to his feet with a mild wince. In hindsight, this position was not a clever idea for the weary bones in his body. "You don't always have to know what to feel. Sometimes it's okay to just be."

For a while, Dazai says nothing behind him as he grabs a bucket from under the sink to gather all the shards of glass there. That's okay too. Chuuya can deal with his silence. He can deal with the anger that's been simmering under his skin for far too long, festering and rotting, because the fact alone that Dazai at least *lets it out* now means that something has given, even if the target on the end of his trigger is Chuuya. He can deal with it. Not forever, but for now, at this very moment in time, he can.

Dazai only pipes up when Chuuya returns to the kitchen, armed with a vacuum cleaner. "Are you really just going to play housemaid now?"

"Well, I don't see you getting your ass up to clean the mess that you made any time soon, *so."* He shrugs. "I like walking around without worrying whether I'll get a piece of salad bowl stuck in my foot."

Dazai purses his lips, then lifts his feet to the chair so his legs won't be in the way. That's answer enough.

To be honest, it's been a hot minute since the last time Chuuya used the vacuum cleaner or… cleaned anything what with how busy work has kept him. He tries to keep at least his bedroom tidy, but even that's a difficult mission to accomplish sometimes. Before Dazai, he used to book a mafia-affiliated cleaning team to his penthouse. After Dazai, it was Oda who made sure to keep most things in order – even though Chuuya told him that it was not part of his job description. ("It isn't, but if I'm going to live here, then I'm going to contribute", was always his answer.) Oddly enough, Dostoevsky of all people took over that job afterwards – still does, when he's in town. For a Russian baron, he's a surprisingly homey person in private. Cooking. Cleaning. Fixing things. It's like having a fuck buddy, mother, father, and handyman all in one person. Very useful that man.

But now that Chuuya's busying himself with cleaning up for the first time in months, or years, he realizes that it's quite relaxing. Meditative. Exhausting too after a while, but that's just that his body after corruption and nothing else.

Maybe, he thinks as he stops the vacuum cleaner with a satisfied sigh, he should do this more often. It's like therapy but more useful and way cheaper.

A tap on his shoulder drags him out of his thoughts and back into the reality of cleaning up after the guy he likes because he threw a fit.

"So this is my apartment, right?" Dazai asks with a smile that

promises lots of things, none of them good.

Chuuya avoids looking at it by packing up the vacuum cleaner. "Yes…"

"So I can do whatever I want with it. Correct?"

"I just cleaned up. If you're planning to destroy it all over again, then you're on your own."

"This isn't a track and field race. Chuuya should stop jumping to conclusions all the time."

"*Yes,* you can do whatever you want with it," he agrees with a sigh. "What is it that you have in mind?"

Dazai responds with a brilliant grin and a jerk of his head to the couch in the living room. "For starters, this. I don't like the way it just… stands here."

Chuuya frowns. "It's a damn couch. What else is it supposed to do?"

"I want it over there," Dazai says, ignoring him completely to point at the neighboring wall, the one facing the doorway instead of the TV.

"You'll get kinks in your neck from having to crane it all the time to…" Chuuya trails off when Dazai's bubbly excitement slowly fizzles out into something cold and challenging. It reminds him of the fact that he never got off earlier. Not that he expects anything in return. It was, after all, just a sliver of apology. An offering. A favor if you will. Not a trade. But the domineering way in which Dazai's hard eyes slide over him, daring him to say another word isn't helping either.

"Fine," Chuuya mutters, stalking over to the couch. "But I don't want to hear a word when you realize that this is a shitty interior design decision."

"I forget the part where I asked. Oh, wait! I didn't."

Bastard.

It's easy enough to move the couch with *for the tainted sorrow,* and if that makes the shitty freeloader happy, then whatever. Chuuya will let him make as many bad decisions like this as he desires.

And Dazai does.

“Next up, the library!” he announces as soon as Chuuya’s done. Except that his reasoning for moving several shelves filled with books is even more absurd than his request before: *I want the books I like closer to the door, so to me, than the books that I don’t care about.*

“You’re just doing this to annoy me, aren’t you?” Chuuya asks afterwards with his hands planted on his hips, lungs working harder than he would prefer them to. “To bitch me around and… and make yourself feel better?”

Leaning against one of said shelves, Dazai doesn’t even bother to glance up when he answers, eyes fixed on inspecting his nails instead. “You really call a little heavy lifting bitching you around?”

Chuuya’s lips press shut.

“Don’t tell me that you’ve somehow lost all that stamina and strength you loveee to bring up in every conversation,” Dazai continues, making his eyes all wide and mock-surprised as he glances at him. “What, the job not leaving you any time to work out anymore?”

“The only heavy lifting I’m doing is handling your damn ego,” Chuuya shoots back.

“Well, in that case. I was thinking of stealing a really pretty drawer from the bookshop downstairs.” He quirks an eyebrow at him. “You’re up for it, right?”

“No fucking problem.”

It *is* a problem.

Or, well it becomes a problem after another five requests, equally as nonsensical and physically challenging to any normal person out there as the other ones. It’s not debilitating. It’s just *exhausting*. Using his ability drains him more than anything else these days, so Chuuya sticks to a strict code of when to use it and when not. Not every fight requires *for the tainted sorrow.* Certainly not every mundane activity, no matter how used Chuuya’s gotten to the convenience of it. Not everything even calls for *Chuuya’s* help. He has enough subordinates on his payroll to give jobs to.

But this is Dazai.

And Dazai is clearly trying to make a point because he *knows* that something is going on.

Whatever it is that he wants to hear though, Chuuya won't say it.

So he brings up the cabinet Dazai wants in *his* library and gets it back down again after the bastard decides that it doesn't fit into the color scheme of the room after all. He rearranges the closet in his room to the other wall, then his bed, then his closet again. He switches the desks in the office and the library. He brings away the microwave because it's "smelly", and orders him a new one in bright pink, a little hard on the eyes but it's not him who is going to have to heat up his food in it. He plasters an empty bottle of sake on the wall as 'decoration.' He changes the light bulb. He does everything Dazai asks him to because he's making a point of his own.

Sure, he has to lose half of his layers because he sweats through all of them, and he feels the telltale signs of an impending pain flare-up, always creeping up on him either during the night or in the morning afterwards, and he has to bite his teeth together to get through it in the last hour, but a little pain and exhaustion won't hold him back from living his life. His body operating on a lower level than it used to before does not mean that *he* is different, or that he owes Dazai or anyone else an explanation. Everything is just fine.

Not that Dazai makes it easy on him, even after three hours of this wordless game. "Hm, Chuuya are you feeling all right? You're looking a little pale over there."

Chuuya grunts out a muffled insult as he lets himself flop down on the couch in the living room, one arm lifting to cover his face so whatever pallor he might have won't be visible to the little bastard. "Your dazzling personality has drained me of all my energy," he mutters eventually, already feeling the familiar traces of sleep branching out in his body and pulling him towards unconsciousness.

"It's barely even eleven," he hears Dazai's voice, closer than it was before. A hand touches his thigh, gently even, but Chuuya can barely feel it over the numbness that has settled over his bones. "What are you, a grandpa?"

"I've got an early meeting tomorrow," he mumbles after his fourth yawn in a span of five minutes.

"You know what would make your dreams even sweeter?"

"…"

"Chuuya."

“…”

“Chuuya?” Dazai pokes his forehead. “Me. I would make your dreams even sweeter. Hello? Chuuya?”

But Chuuya’s already fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next up we have:
- an ultimatum
- a choice
- and a surprise!

Chapter 21: The One

Chapter Notes

> It's been a while but today I bring you a TK update! Also yes, I've changed the chapter count yet again but not because I added anything to the story, but because the remaining 3 chapters would have all be 20k words long otherwise and that does not go well with my motivation lmao, so shorter chapters and HOPEFULLY faster updates to get to the finish line but I make no promises because life is keeping me busy at the moment! Enjoy >:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chuuya has been passed out on the couch for the last four hours already. It's that ocean-deep, dead-to-the-world kind of sleep because not even the chorus of chicken screams from the YouTube video that Dazai played right next to his ear managed to wake him up.

It's not a strange sight, per se.

Dazai has seen the man snore up half of the town plenty of times before. Many of them lying next to Chuuya, imagining the things he must be dreaming of, making up star constellations out of the sea of freckles on his face, or pretending that his obscene snoring is the white noise that he once had tried listening to alone in his dorm when his brain refused to grant him even a few hours of rest.

The thing is that Dazai has never seen Chuuya quite so… drained. After this little bit of physical heavy lifting, no less. There were times during the battle against those pesky Americans when Chuuya came home tired, only bothering to wash the dirt off his body, brush his teeth, plant a kiss on Dazai's mouth before crawling into bed and passing out face-first. But that was *mafia* work. That was using his ability and body and mind for hours on end. Those were short nights but *rested* mornings.

Following the exotic curve of Chuuya's tattoos, Dazai has the creeping suspicion that he will not feel magically revitalized in the morning. There was even a tiny part of him that shrunk in frozen terror when Chuuya had suddenly been asleep, scared that he had managed to annoy him to actual death. But Chuuya's chest rose again, is still rising and falling with each breath, and even though Dazai is confident that

it will continue to rise for a long, long while, that knot in his stomach hasn't relaxed since.

Something is up.

He can smell it in the air. See it in the new, unfamiliar shadows of Chuuya's one visible eye when he thinks Dazai is not looking. Hear it at the end of every sentence like an annoying guest that refuses to leave.

Something…

Something is happening, and Dazai is once again not part of it, and as much as he wants to be angry about that, all he can muster up is concerned suspicion.

Something, something, something –

Something is always happening.

And for once in his silly little life, Dazai doesn't want to let it pass by. He wants to grab that something by its throat and watch it grapple in his grip until it crumbles into ash and dust.

After another look at Chuuya's sleeping face, so unfairly handsome even now, Dazai slips his hand into the man's pocket and fishes out his phone. That's the good thing about his snow-white slumber: not even the invasion of his privacy is enough to pull him out of it.

Dazai isn't surprised that his locked screen doesn't reveal any messages or notifications that he might have received. As a mafia boss, that would be a concerning thing to display, and even though Dazai likes to call him stupid, they both know that he's anything but.

He tries unlocking it a few times with a few basic guesses like Dazai's birthday, Dazai's name in numbers, the date that they first met, and the date that they reunited without any success. Biting his lip, he pauses for a moment so the phone won't lock him out completely.

What would Chuuya's password be if not anything related to Dazai: *the most important person in his life?*

Yosano? Not likely. They're good friends, but she would mercilessly bully him if she ever found out that she was part of a passcode on his phone.

Fyodor? Even the thought of that rat makes Dazai's lips curl in distaste, but it's not likely either. As much shit as he likes to give Chuuya about their… sexual relations, rightfully so obviously, he is clever enough to believe Chuuya when he says that it was just that. A sexual relationship. Inserting Fyodor into his daily life would be insane.

Oda? Not the likeliest choice either.

Does Chuuya have other friends? Yes. Too many if you ask Dazai. Too many birthdays to remember. But are any of them important enough for something like this? Nope.

It could be something completely random. A bunch of numbers strung together for the sake of safety. But that would render all of Dazai's efforts fruitless and he is too bored to accept that possibility.

He closes his eyes, conjures up a vivid image of Chuuya typing in his passcode with a good-natured half-frown on his face. He zeroes in on the movements of Chuuya's fingers, the position they take on the screen, several times before he looks at the phone in his hands again, mirroring the motions he just imagined and –

And voila.

19102237

It could be a date. A phone number. Coordinates. Anything. But for now, it doesn't matter because Dazai is *in*.

Making himself comfortable against the couch on the floor, Chuuya's right arm dangling next to him like an unconventional pillow, Dazai goes through his phone. His notes are sadly empty of any juicy self-reflections or innermost secrets, just random words, grocery lists, and an odd name here and there.

Boring.

If he was any other person in this world his messages should contain some interesting things, but being who he is, he will most likely have most of his communication cleared out every few days, encoded, or none at all, talking to people over phone conversations instead of texts. Or all three in Chuuya's case. There are chats with his subordinates like Akutagawa and Atsushi. Boring. With names that don't mean anything to Dazai. Still boring. With Yosano… though their conversations resemble his notes: short messages about things to

buy, some random tidbits of information, and times. What sparks his interest the most is a conversation with Odasaku from two days ago. Dazai's thumb swipes it open before he can even blink.

The last message was from Oda's side: *thanks buddy*

Frowning suspiciously, he scrolls up to find the start of it, a few hours before the last one:

[Oda] : hey remember that drink you used to bring home all the time??

[Chuuya] : I'll need u to be a bit more specific than that

[Oda] : in those plastic cups

[Oda] : it looked like coffee, but it wasn't coffee

[Oda] : tasted sweet

[Chuuya] : Idk

[Chuuya] : Frapuccinos?

[Oda] : it had tiny balls in it

[Oda] : the one Dazai liked so much

[Chuuya] : U mean boba tea?

[Oda] : yes, that's it

[Chuuya] : How can u be friends with Dazai and not know boba tea?

[Oda] : i forgot what it's called

[Oda] : and to be fair we didn't have any boba in the countryside

[Chuuya] : Ok fair point

[Chuuya] : Is he okay?

[Oda] : just a little moody

[Oda] : but the tea will help

[Oda] : thanks buddy

Dazai's fingers curl around the phone as an aggravated breath escapes his chest. How dare Odasaku, someone who is supposed to be Dazai's *friend*, conspire with the enemy? And talk about him? And about something as sacred as *boba tea* of all things?

It can't be anything other than the rat's influence. Fyodor is corrupting Odasaku, just like he does with everything else that he gets his dirty little rat fingers on.

The worst thing about this betrayal though is that the boba tea that Oda brought home that day really coaxed him out of bed, eliciting enough happy chemicals in his brain to convince him he was cured of any mental illnesses and traumas for at least a few hours. And all because of, Dazai shoots Chuuya a glare, *him*.

The rest of his chats are far less insightful. When Dazai doesn't find one specific name in it, he looks it up. Tachihara. Both to see whether he was part of Chuuya's sexual escapades in the last few months and to finally get a glimpse of what that guy looks like.

He makes a face when he sees that he's *ginger*.

Two gingers hooking up with each other? That should be considered incest.

Their last significant exchange dates back to several months ago before he even sent Dazai away:

[Tachihara] : Up for drinks later?

[Chuuya] : Not with me anymore, sorry dude

[Tachihara] : oh shit

[Tachihara] : you and your kitten serious now?

[Chuuya] : Yeah

[Tachihara] : good luck bro

Kitten.

Kitten?

Dazai sends Chuuya another death-glower before contemplating his next choice of action. Then he types: *you up for drinks?*

The reply comes embarrassingly fast. *really? sure*

Sorry, Dazai types, a pleased smile curving around his lips, *wrong number*

This time, there is no response.

After deleting the texts, Dazai browses through the rest of the phone. Calendar entries. Peculiar apps he might have. E-mails. Chuuya's photos.

By the looks of it, Chuuya's life must have been exceptionally boring because not even that gets him anything. No pictures of anything that could have happened in the last nine months. No dick picks. No sex tapes. Not even any selfies – at least, not any new ones. The ones Dazai does find are from ten months ago and most of them are with him in them. A blurry picture of them in bed next to each other. A photograph that Dazai snuck of them while Chuuya was half-draped over his back, reading a book. A selfie of them just sitting next to each other, frowning a little as if Chuuya didn't even realize he was taking a picture.

Dazai is on the search for something useful though, not something to make him sit and stare at the screen for ten minutes, trying to remember what the air in his lungs tasted like back then. So he closes the app as well and opens the chat with Yosano again. The temptation to simply ask *hey, what's wrong with me?* is big, but all tempting things are usually bad and stupid. That's way too obvious. Dazai has to be subtle.

[Chuuya] : Hey, not feeling so good

That's not even a lie. Not exactly. And subtle enough, right?

Satisfied, Dazai clicks send.

It takes a few minutes to get a response.

[Yosano] : Dazai?

His brows tug into an offended frown. She could tell it's Dazai just from looking at a text? He even mimicked Chuuya's typing patterns. Then he blinks, and his scowl digs itself even deeper.

She doesn't know that it's Dazai.

She's asking whether Dazai is *the reason* for Chuuya's bad mood.

The audacity.

The *slander*.

[Chuuya] : Nah

That is something he would say.

[Chuuya] : just tired

Again, not even a lie.

[Yosano] : Take a nap.

Sighing, Dazai deletes the messages once again and exits this worthless exchange. What an epic waste of time. Even talking to Chuuya got him more answers than his stupid phone. He puts it back where it belongs, visits the kitchen to grab a bag of crab chips that they bought yesterday, and flops back down on the floor. Thinking.

He thinks for a long time.

The product of his thinking, in the end, is this: he squeezes himself into the tiny space on the edge of the sofa that Chuuya's body isn't occupying and brings his fingers to his nose. Then he squeezes, preventing any air from coming through.

For a moment nothing happens.

Then Chuuya's eyes fly open, and he jerks up with a little gasp, gaping at Dazai, whose hands are back in his lap and folded together innocently, with one wide, startled eye. "Wha… what are you doing?"

"Waiting for you to make some room," he says matter-of-factly. "You know it's pretty rude to be a guest and take up all the space. What if I want to sit down and watch some TV, huh? What then, Chuuya?"

"You woke me up for this?" Chuuya mutters, rubbing a hand over his face before blinking and pointing at the other free part of the couch. "There's enough space for two of your beanpole bodies right there!"

"But I want to sit *here*."

"You...!" Chuuya barely holds back a snarl as he pushes himself off the couch to stalk over to the other one.

“You can’t sleep there either!”

Chuuya’s gaze oozes frustrated rage when Dazai sprints over to block that part of the couch for him as well. “Why not?!”

“Because I say so,” Dazai replies self-evidently. “Why do you keep questioning me, hm? Is nothing I ever say enough for you?”

“I’ll kill you,” Chuuya hisses, invading his personal space until their faces are only a breath away even with their glaring height difference. Then again Chuuya has never needed his height to make himself tall. His personality manages to do that all on its own. “I’ll wrap my hands around your throat and squeeze the life out of you, Dazai. I swear to god, I *will* if you don’t get out of my way *now*.”

It takes an enormous amount of self-discipline not to go down on his knees right then and there. Luckily, abstaining from the things he wants is something Dazai is well-versed in. Still, he has to swallow a few times to school his voice into something defiant rather than the horny, masochistic monster Chuuya just woke from hibernation. “There are enough beds in here to sleep in,” he says, finding the gall to even raise his chin. “And by beds, I mean one. Because you can’t sleep in Odasaku’s. He doesn’t like short people. I know it must come as a surprise, but it’s true. He really doesn’t.”

Chuuya’s eye narrows, filtering through the bullshit to receive the unspoken message behind it. Then he huffs out a dry breath and gives Dazai’s arm a slight shove before stalking away.

In the direction of his bedroom.

Dazai’s chest plummets like he just ran a marathon, and he collapses on the closest couch, marinating in the feeling of relief and hazy confusion and the ever-present pinch of self-hatred for a while. Eventually, once Chuuya is hopefully back in dreamland, he brushes his teeth and slips inside the comforting darkness of his room, squinting at the unmoving body in his bed as he tiptoes over there.

His eyes must be treacherous traitors because Chuuya’s not asleep when he draws up the blanket to his chin and lies down, facing his back.

“Next time you want me in your damn bed just fucking say so.”

Dazai tsks breathlessly. “If I wanted that, I would have. You half-hanging off the couch was just a pitiful picture. I *pitied* you.”

He thinks he sees Chuuya shake his head before the sweet whisper of sleep beckons them both in.

Dazai falls asleep to white noise.

The first thing Chuuya feels is warmth. Honey-sweet, gooey warmth pouring into every empty space inside his body like molten sunshine, drowning out the distant ache in the back of his skull with pure bliss.

The second thing he feels a moment later, is the *floor*. And how cold and hard it is when you get pushed out of bed to land face-first on it.

Groaning, Chuuya blinks open his eye, requiring a few seconds to make out whose dark room it is that is spinning around him. Then memories of yesterday start flashing through his mind, memories of Dazai and his stupid, pretty face, and all those ugly words out of his mouth, and his anger, and his refusal to act like an adult about it, and he finally gathers enough strength to push himself up on his fists.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

His words are directed at the brat of a person that’s currently lying in bed, swaddled in blankets, safe and sound after kicking Chuuya out of it even though *Dazai* was the one to bully him into sleeping here in the first place. Even though *Dazai* reached for him during the night, wrapping himself around Chuuya like a clingy octopus. *Dazai*. It was Dazai.

And yet *Dazai* doesn’t even deem him worthy of a response, shoving his nose deeper into the pillow and acting stupid.

Despite the throbbing pain that flares up in his bones, Chuuya lunges off the floor and grabs Dazai’s chin, half-climbing on the bed in the process, to at least make the brat have the decency to look at him when he’s speaking. “Listen here, you little bitch –”

“Get off me!” Dazai shrieks with an undignified squeak, failing to struggle out of the tight grip around his face. “This is harassment!”

“No, *you* are harassment! You don’t get to beg me to sleep in your bed, then push me out of it the next morning!”

“I would never beg, especially not for you!”

“You don’t get to fucking use me whenever you feel like it and treat

me like trash as soon as your mood changes!"

Dazai attempts another round of the futile escape game but Chuuya is faster even when every single muscle in his body is aching, pinning the brat down to the bed with his arms around his wrists. The baleful glower he receives in reply is lethal poison.

"Make up your damn mind, Dazai," he growls. "Either you treat me like a fucking human being or don't, but you can't do both."

"Can't I?" Dazai's head tilts, eyes glinting like shiny, sharp diamonds. "You say that but you don't do anything to stop it." He lets out a provocative exhale. "You let me treat you like this because you *know* you deserve it."

Chuuya's fingers around him tighten. "I don't."

"You do."

"I *don't.*"

"Then stop acting like it!"

"I'm not acting like anything!" Chuuya exclaims. "The only reason I'm still here is that I fucking care about you! Because none of my feelings for you have changed! Because I want this to work, I want you in my life, I want *you*, but you're not making it easy, Dazai!"

"Newsflash: it won't ever get easier! Because that's me! That's what I am! I'm not easy to love and you're too stubborn to admit that!"

"You're…" Chuuya's words trail off, replaced by a confused blink.

This whole time he was convinced this was about *them*, about what they'd done to each other – and don't get him wrong, he's sure a lot of this is Dazai punishing him for sending him away – but it's also about more than that.

It's about the bottomless ocean of self-hatred inside Dazai, swallowing every word of love and affection he receives without ever letting him have a taste.

"Do you know why I waited for as long as I could before finally giving in to this? To us?" The grip of Chuuya's hands softens. "Because of how *easy* it was to fall in love with you, and easy things in a life like this, they…" He shrugs helplessly. "They don't come by very often.

When they do, they usually don't last very long. Making it work is hard. Trying to push aside all the worries and fears that come with it is hard. Playing this back-and-forth game is hard. But loving you? Easiest thing in this goddamn world."

Dazai's expression wavers unsteadily, torn between denial and more of that anger inside him. In the end, what he whispers is, "Then why was it so easy for you to leave me?"

Chuuya's chest sinks. He swallows, throat dry. "Because I was scared." And more often than not, fear is louder than love. Not bigger, not more, not even more powerful. Just louder.

"I'm scared all the time, Chuuya. I was scared of letting you in. Scared of you to decide that I'm not worth it. Scared of this." Dazai nods at the places where their bodies touch. "And I still somehow stayed. And all it took was one mistake for you to leave. What if you get scared again?"

"I *won't.*"

"You can't know that."

"But I can try."

"Well, maybe *I* can't."

Chuuya stares at him.

"I think I want you," Dazai tells him. "But it's not going to last forever, right? Nothing ever does. I could survive without you."

"Doesn't mean you have to."

"But maybe I do. Because I want you but every time I have you, I get so angry. You make me feel so many things, Chuuya, and none of them are good. You set my soul on fire, and I hate it. It's not easy. It's *hard."*

"So… what?" Chuuya asks like an idiot because apparently hearing that he is hard to love isn't explicit enough.

"So you're saying I can't do both," Dazai says quietly, "and I'm saying I can't do one. I can't go back to the way we were before."

Chuuya shakes his head. "I'm not asking you to forget. We can work on it. We can talk about it. I'm just sick of not knowing whether to

expect a fucking kiss or a punch from you. It's exhausting."

"I don't think talking will solve all our problems."

"What, and punishing me will?"

Dazai juts out his chin. "Yes. Life is all about balance."

"That's not balance," Chuuya snaps. "It's revenge."

"Same thing!"

He brings his fingers back to Dazai's chin, seizing it to get him to shut up for a moment. "Choose, Dazai. One or the other because I'm done letting you knock me around."

"I towd yew –"

"I don't want you to tell me, I want you to fucking choose and act like it." With that, Chuuya lets go of him. After another pointed glare, he slides off the bed, barely able to stifle the groan of pain that bubbles up in his throat when his feet hit the ground.

He needs a hot bath. And a glass of wine. Or two. And an orgasm. Though he doubts he will get any of these any time soon, not with Dazai intent on breaking him, and his body too tired to even jerk it.

He is surprised to hear muffled murmurs come from the kitchen because last he heard Yosano was having Oda (and Dostoevsky) over. Given how deep his sleep was – before Dazai none too gently pushed him out of it – it's possible that he missed Oda coming back.

Not just him, he sees when he waddles into the kitchen, trying to rub the exhaustion off his face. Yosano and Dostoevsky, too. So the whole gang is here to see his miserable walk of shame.

"Morning sunshine," Yosano greets him with a brilliant smile and a steaming cup of coffee, looking not only well-rested but *glowing*. Unfair.

Slumping down in the chair next to her, Chuuya mutters out, "morning."

"Aww," she coos, "rough night?"

"Is one way of naming it." The gloom of his rude awakening softens when Yosano's fingers settle around the back of his neck, kneading the

tension out of his skin like she has done many times before in the past. One of the few recipes to get him through a bad day without numbing his pain with alcohol. “What are you all doing here anyway?” he asks after a minute or so, eyes closed as he leans into the massage. “Thought you were – oh shit, that’s so… good -- shacking up at home.”

“A little birdie told us it was raining glass here,” Fyodor’s voice tells him, followed by the scrape of a chair nearby. “We wanted to make sure the building would survive the war of the roses.”

Chuuya frowns. “What little birdie?”

“That would be me.” Oda. “I stopped by yesterday.”

“You did? When?”

“When it was raining glass.”

“Oh… well, the building’s fine,” Chuuya murmurs and peeks one eye open to squint at Dostoevsky. “And Dazai’s not going to appreciate you being here.”

Dostoevsky’s mouth curves into an aggravating smile. “He doesn’t seem to appreciate your presence here either.”

“Fuck off.” Except that the man chooses this exact moment to pull one foot into his lap and dig his fingers, equally as talented as Yosano’s, into the taut muscles there, drawing a rather embarrassing groan out of Chuuya. “Fuck off, but *don’t* stop doing that.”

His chuckle is even more aggravating but the way his hands locate the points of tension in his foot and release it with a few clever movements convince Chuuya to let it slide. Just this once.

“I’ll give you a ride home afterwards,” Yosano says. “Then you can take a nap.”

Chuuya grunts in disagreement. “I’ll be heading to work, not home.”

“We can keep the place running for one afternoon without you, Chuuya.”

“I’m fine,” he says, mostly because his eye flutters open and he remembers that Oda is here. Oda who is not privy to the status of his health. Or, so he hopes, but he trusts Yosano to keep it confidential.

Not only as her boss or her friend but also as her patient, the only one who gets to decide who to tell.

As if sensing the attention, Oda turns around, a pink apron adorning his… decently-sized pecs, and cocks his head. “How do you feel about eggs?”

“Like I want them in my stomach.”

Oda smiles.

Chuuya grins back.

The curve around his mouth fades when the sound of footsteps alerts him to the next round of fighting that is sure to come any second now.

“Well, well, well,” Dazai says with a disappointed headshake as he takes in all three of them. “Don’t you all look cozy together.”

“You can join any time you want,” Yosano drawls at the same time as Dostoevsky murmurs, “It does not only *look* cozy.”

Chuuya rubs his cheek, too relaxed from the god-sent fingers of his friends to take the bait. What he doesn’t expect is the crabby but determined expression on Dazai’s face when he stomps over to Dostoevsky and yanks him back by the collar of his sweater. “Move.”

Dostoevsky meets his stubborn gaze head-on, eyes narrowing, and then he lets go of Chuuya’s foot as if deciding that this isn’t worth a fight. The air grows thick with tension when Dazai takes his place, jaw set, looking like he wants to do anything but this even though he still forces his eyes to seek out Chuuya.

“You have to give me some time.”

Chuuya blinks. Is he really continuing this conversation here? In front of everyone?

Behind him, Yosano hums and gives his neck one final knead before dropping a kiss on his head and joining the other two men that are incredibly busy chopping vegetables on the other side of the kitchen.

Dazai stares at him like they are the only two people here though. Like they are the only two in the entire world. A gift that not many people have. “I deserve a little time from you,” he adds a moment later, voice uncharacteristically shaky. “You owe me that much.”

“Time for what?” Chuuya dares to ask. “To be angry or to punish me? Because those are two different things.”

Dazai exhales and lowers his eyes to his lap where Chuuya’s foot is resting, untouched. Chuuya can see him toss words around in his head, looking for the perfect sentence to verbalize the thoughts in there as drives his fingers up and down Chuuya’s ankle like he’s afraid he might hurt him if he pushes too hard. “I don’t know the difference,” he says eventually. “You hurt me. I have to hurt you back. That’s the only thing that makes any sense to me, and I know that you think that’s me acting childish or…” He shakes his head. “… or that my brain is broken, but I can’t turn it off. I don’t know how to get over this without making it right.”

“You can have all the time in the world, Dazai.”

His gaze snaps to him. “I can?”

Chuuya muffles his laugh against his palm. “Jesus fuck, of course you can. I know that we have some stuff to work through. I know that it’s going to take time.”

“And you’re… willing to wait?” Dazai asks slowly. “For me?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

A startlingly loud chopping noise comes from the three intruders at the stove, clearly there to remind Chuuya that maybe promising time and himself, the two things that don’t go hand in hand together, is not the most honest answer.

But it’s still the truth.

He can’t for the life of him imagine meeting anyone else and falling in love and fighting like a madman just to get a glimpse of that one lopsided smile here and there. Maybe that’s naïve. Maybe it’s what everybody who falls in love for the first time thinks. But it also comes from the bottom of his fucking soul.

Dazai is *it*.

This is the one.

Chuuya might survive without him and live a life without him, but it will be a life half-lived. A life lacking one specific color.

“I am,” he says again, holding Dazai’s stunned stare.

“And maybe another chance.”

Chuuya’s head tilts. “Huh?”

“I need another chance from you,” Dazai says. “In case I lose this one. And I probably will. I can already feel it brewing inside me.” He shoots his tummy an accusing glare before lifting his eyes to him again. “And I need to know that it won’t make you scared. That you’ll wait for me anyway.”

“That’s a lot to ask for,” he murmurs because as much as he wants to say yes right away, give him everything he wants just for the possibility of a somewhat good ending for the two of them, Dazai perhaps had a point earlier. If Chuuya keeps letting it happen, then there’s no point in complaining about it later on. Either Dazai wants this or not. Either Dazai uses this chance or…

Or not.

Dazai’s fingers tighten around his ankle, his eyes flickering like two flames in the deep darkness of the night at him. “And I’m asking you for it anyway.”

But in the end…

In the end, Chuuya’s not the only one giving out chances. Not by far.

“You’re giving me one,” he mutters with a sigh, “even though I hurt you. It’s only fair for me to do the same.” His brows waggle. “Eye for an eye, right?”

“Tit for tat,” Dazai agrees, lips curving up into that crooked half-smile. *The* one.

“Yeah. Tit for tat.”

Still smiling, Dazai glances down at his foot again, fingers skimming over his sole and then experimentally pushing down, earning himself a little twitch. When his gaze settles on Chuuya, it’s with a sadistic gleam in it. “Are you sure you don’t have a foot thing?”

“I don’t have a fucking foot thing,” he mutters without any heat in his words. “Foot massages are just really good.”

“I don’t see how anyone groping your feet would ever feel pleasant,”

Dazai responds while doing exactly that.

“That’s because you’ve never had anyone rub your feet before,” Dostoevsky’s voice suddenly pipes up out of nowhere, bursting the bubble the two of them made for themselves with a loud *pop*. “You’ve always been so stingy.”

Chuuya feels Dazai’s irritation from the sudden force coming from his fingers, though he doesn’t let it be heard in his voice when he says, “I’ll have to call a terminator to clean up the rodents living in my house.”

“Been there, done that,” Chuuya commiserates with him and makes a face. “Can’t say that it worked. They keep coming back every two weeks.”

“Hm, how about we do it ourselves then? Let’s kill him. You and me. Together.”

“Sakunosuke,” Fyodor says somewhere in the back, “they’re ganging up on me. I don’t like it.”

“Should have kept your mouth shut then,” Yosano replies cheerfully.

“Maybe if you rub their feet, they’ll be nicer,” Oda suggests, the teasing smile evident in his voice.

“The rat does not go anywhere near my feet,” Dazai cuts in, blowing out a huffy breath at the mere suggestion before his eyes find Chuuya’s, and there is a fleeting moment of simple acknowledgment and understanding between the two of them. The suggestion of two smiles that haven’t seen the light of day in nine months.

Chuuya’s insides flip-flop like they’re trying to escape, but it’s the good kind of pain.

“All right, that’s enough,” he decides after a few more minutes of murmured banter in the kitchen. But Dazai stops his attempt of stealing his foot away by promptly pulling it back to his lap with a stern click of his tongue. “Oi –"

“I haven’t even started yet,” Dazai chides. “I am good at this too, you know.”

“You have been – “Chuuya’s words bleed into a string of stunned moans when Dazai’s fingers dig in, pressing into all the right spots

with such precision that he sees god in front of him for a moment. That, or a pretty, shiny entity that breathes pleasurable sparks into his lungs. “Holy shit, when did you… how did you… *fuck*.”

The grin Dazai wears on his face is diabolic. His movements on the other hand effortless. “I told you, Chuuya. I’m good.”

And if that’s his way of catching the mouse in his territory, fangs and all, then Chuuya is fine with it. Completely okay. Perfect even.

He has to shift on his chair and take a deep breath to survive the onslaught of Dazai’s ministrations. On the other side of the kitchen, Yosano turns around and frowns around a chop stick in her mouth. “We aren’t this embarrassing, right?”

“No way,” Dostoevsky tells her before stealing the spoon.

“You are,” Oda replies without even bothering to turn around to see what she’s talking about.

“*We* are,” Yosano corrects.

Oda’s broad shoulders shake with a quiet huff. “Oh, I know I’m part of this package. I’m just not as embarrassing.”

Chuuya props his cheek up on one hand and watches Dazai work, his face scrunched up in concentration like massaging his feet is the single most important task in the world.

It’s a surprisingly good morning.

So is the next week.

Well, as good as one can get in this kind of life.

Chuuya’s pain clings to him for a few more days before subsiding into a dull echo, still there – it always is, but only loud enough if he pays attention. Work keeps him from doing that, especially when Dazai insists on paying him daily visits to offer his generous help in their quest against the special division forces even though all he does is shove folders off Chuuya’s desk, complain, and harass his subordinates.

It's better. After their conversation that morning, it definitely is. But it’s also no be-all, end-all solution. Dazai’s resenting anger still simmers under most of his words and sharp smiles, Chuuya finds

himself wondering what other secrets Dazai could be harboring in his treasure of a past, and there is the fact that their meetings are limited to the headquarters only. No more trips to Dazai's apartment. Certainly not to Chuuya's. And no make-out sessions on the floor either. Only teasing touches here and there.

Dazai and Oda meet with the lawyers that the port mafia arranged for them, ones who have already been talking to the state about their cases ever since the fight at the interstate.

Chuuya hears from his guy in the special division office, reporting that it's been rather quiet on that front, though he doubts they've simply decided to give up on the book. Either they're looking for other organizations to bully into helping, doing it on their own or they're just cooking up something new. Whatever it is, he's sure something is coming.

It's *better*.

It's *good*.

It's like that split second before lighting strikes and the air gets charged with electricity.

Something is coming.

And when it does, it will announce itself with a bang.

Chapter End Notes

Next up we have:
- an unannounced guest
- a performance
- a bang :D

Also peep the new gorgeous, wonderful art of this fic here, here and here!!!!

Chapter 22: Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somehow Chuuya comes home suspiciously early on a Saturday–something that he hasn't managed to do since he became the boss. Naps in the middle of the day? Sure. Late mornings? Pretty much a standard when his hours run late into the night. But an entire evening off on the *weekend?* A pipe dream.

The paperwork has been done though, all the fires put out, and, in the end, it's Yosano who convinces him to take his ass home so he can eat the dinner that Dostoevsky left on the stove for them while it's still warm.

It would taste even better if he had anyone to share it with, but maybe some time for himself is just what he needs.

Chuuya changes his mind about that as soon as he slugs down the last bite of his food and automatically glances around the room, searching for someone to tell that he's finished and happy about it, only to be met with loud silence and empty air.

Maybe he could call Dazai.

Maybe he should *do* something about all that building tension between them.

Maybe –

Bzzzzz.

Frowning, Chuuya gets up to check who in the world would dare to come knocking at his door. Yosano and Dostoevsky have their own set of keys. No one else visits–or even knows his address. He has put enough money and personnel into keeping this place guarded at all times in case the special division or any other enemies of his suddenly grow some balls.

Except that when he presses the button on his security system to see who is waiting on the other side, it's no one other than Dazai himself, wearing a long, black leather overcoat and a deceptively silly smile that hides more things than any piece of clothing ever could.

For a moment Chuuya wonders whether he is hallucinating, seeing the things that he wants to see. But if this is a dream, then he might as well watch it play out until the end. He snaps open the door and ushers Dazai inside before turning to him with a quizzical scowl. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Oh, relax,” Dazai waves him off, only bothering to kick off his shoes. “Odasaku drove me. We even asked a few of your goons to trail us so no one else would. I was safe and sound the entire time.”

Squinting, Chuuya follows him as he leisurely strolls deeper into the apartment. “That was… surprisingly careful of you.”

Dazai spins around to him with a sparkling hundred-watt smile. “Wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he says and glances around the living room to make sure there aren’t any surprise cameras here. Or maybe an invisible bazooka that will blow him up at any moment. When he finds nothing, he looks at Dazai again, scanning the coat and that dangerous glint in his eyes. It’s his scheming face. He is up to something.

“Still,” Chuuya adds, taking a few steps forward to tug at the belt around Dazai’s waist before lifting his gaze to him. “What are you doing here? Couldn’t get enough of me at work?”

Dazai lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. “I felt like rehashing my memories. This used to be my home too, you know.” Then he slithers out of Chuuya’s proximity, taking stock of the apartment with wide, lofty steps, his arms swinging by his sides the entire time. “It smells like rat,” he says after a minute, his nose wrinkling and making Chuuya’s head spin in dizzying circles. “Used to be better.”

“A lot of things used to be better,” Chuuya murmurs, keeping his eyes fixed on him the entire time. Not only because he can practically taste the secret poison that dictates this impromptu visit, but because of how cute he looks right now. Hopping through his apartment and making snarky comments. Chuuya needs to soak up as much of it as possible while he still can.

“Hm, you’re not wrong,” Dazai says in a lilting tone, dragging his nails, painted black, over the arm of the couch. “But you’re still a high-functioning alcoholic, right? Because I could use a drink, and you should get me one.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I’m not an alcoholic, you little shit.”

“Semantics. What matters is whether you have something stronger than beer.”

“So you’re here to steal my booze then?” Chuuya mutters with a sigh as he goes to grab a bottle of wine from the cellar. He still has the brand that Dazai enjoys, the *only* one that he enjoys, because he bought a whole stock of it a year ago and hasn’t touched it since. Too bittersweet.

“Why can’t you just be happy to see me?” Dazai asks behind him. “I thought you liked me.”

And it’s questions like these that make him stop for a second and run his brain ragged to figure out which layer behind his words is intentional and which isn’t. Which one is there to be useful, and which one is actually true.

“I am.” Fingers looping around the bottle, Chuuya clears his throat before turning to look at him. “I do.”

Dazai ignores him when he tries to pass him the bottle in favor of tilting his head. “But?”

“But nothing. If you’re here to drink wine and hang out with me, I’m more than fine with it.”

Dazai rewards him with another one of his slow, smoldering smiles, and murmurs, “good boy.” Then he turns to lead the way out of the cellar.

Chuuya has to grip the bottle in his hand extra tightly to make sure it doesn’t accidentally slip and crash to the floor—even with *for the tainted sorrow* flowing through his veins. Between the two of them, they have probably shattered enough glass for a lifetime.

Their destination is the kitchen where Dazai plants his butt on the edge of the table and lets Chuuya do the work of getting them two glasses and pouring the wine inside. A heady silence lingers between them, stretching and expanding with each breath, each shared glance, and each accidental brush of fingers.

If the wine wasn’t from his own cellar, Chuuya would assume it’s poisoned what with the greedy way Dazai’s eyes follow him when he lifts the glass to take a sip, so heated that Chuuya feels like the room has shrunk to 1/10 of its size.

“So I got bored a few days ago,” Dazai starts, twisting the glass between his long fingers, “and I decided to browse through the internet. As one does.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says. He’s sure the shoe is about to drop any second now. Dazai and being bored? That’s chaos guaranteed.

“And I accidentally landed on one of those shopping sites. With all these interesting clothes.”

Chuuya hums. “Accidentally.”

“My hand just slipped. One moment I was reading a news article about pandas, the next I was putting clothes in my shopping cart!” Dazai pauses to take a sip of the wine, letting out a modest sigh. “Anyways, since you left us all those credit cards–and since you basically robbed me of my entire life,” he adds with a conspiring wink, “I thought to myself: why not splurge? It’s good for mental health, after all.”

“I’ve heard that somewhere before, yeah.”

Even if that somewhere was Dazai himself--right before he ordered so many clothes that they had to arrive in ten different packages. But hey, a little retail therapy also can’t hurt, right?

“You must know some brilliant people,” Dazai remarks, his way of patting himself on the back. “The clothes arrived today. Hence, this.” His fingers tug at the collar of the coat. “Looks good on me, doesn’t it?”

“Very,” Chuuya indulges him–and indulges himself by letting his eye linger on his waist and the elegant slope of his bare neck, free of any bandages, for as long as he wants to, getting his fill for tonight… and the next two weeks probably. “A little tougher than your usual style, but you make it work.”

“Given how much time I spend with the boss of the mafia, it made sense to adjust my wardrobe accordingly. We can’t have your precious subordinates thinking that I’m soft, can we?”

Holding his challenging stare, Chuuya inclines his head. “We sure can’t.”

“I’m so glad you agree,” Dazai says and sets his glass down to untie the belt around his waist before sliding his coat open and revealing

what's underneath. "Now what do you think about this?"

Chuuya's dick gets so hard so fast that he gets dizzy, forced to lower his hand to clutch the edge of the table for support as he stares at Dazai's body.

Because what's hiding underneath is lace.

And white fabric.

And so much skin.

What's hiding underneath is *lingerie*.

A frilly bralette made out lace around his chest, its white color striking against his smooth skin, still tanned from the countryside. A matching set of underwear, spanning high around his hipbones, only the faint elegant patterns sewn into the fabric hiding his dick that's nestled inside. Worst of all is the garter belt, stressing the ridiculous length of his legs, and connecting to the matching collar around his neck.

Chuuya swallows. Then does it again. Without really thinking about it, he tries to step forward–to do what, he doesn't know–but Dazai keeps the careful distance between them by taking a step back and tutting him softly. "Nuh-uh. No touching."

"No touching?" Chuuya echoes miserably, gaze lifting to meet Dazai's perfectly composed expression. There is a gleam of pity there like he's sad about having to enforce these rules but simply has no other choice.

"Not just yet. *First*… tell me what you think."

Chuuya blinks as he tries to make his head work when right in front of him is Dazai… dressed like *this*.

"You still haven't answered my question, Chuuya," Dazai reminds him softly.

Right.

What does he think of this?

"I think –" He has to clear his throat. "I think that you look stunning."

That's a gross understatement but it's all he can get out right now.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Dazai cocks his head. “What else?”

Chuuya’s eyes get dragged down, down, down like magnets. “I adore your legs.”

“Heh, thank you,” Dazai murmurs and twists said legs this way and that as if he’s noticing them for the first time. “I guess they don’t look too bad.”

“They’re stunning,” Chuuya blurts out. “And I want to –” He shakes his head. There aren’t enough words in his vocabulary to describe what it is that he wants to do to these legs. What he wants to do to Dazai. “I can’t decide whether I want to keep the lingerie on you while I fuck you senseless or whether I want to strip you naked first, tear them off with my teeth, and only fuck you after I had every single centimeter of you in my mouth. All I know is that I…”

Dazai arches one brow when he trails off. A wordless demand to continue.

Heat pulses inside him. Chuuya grabs his glass of wine and takes a big gulp before speaking. “All I know is that I want to fuck you, and I don’t know what it takes for you to allow me to do that, but I’m willing to give you all of it, so –…” He forces his eye back to Dazai’s face. “So what do you want?”

“What if I just want you?” Dazai asks quietly.

And that –

Of all the things Chuuya expected to hear–the throne, a thousand apologies carved into his own flesh, him on his knees, a public announcement of how stupid he is for all the world to see, his heart and blood and bones–*this* was not one of them.

For the second time tonight, Chuuya is stunned into silence, his brain rebooting all over again.

“Drink up,” Dazai tells him with a gentle jerk of his chin towards the glass. “And let’s move this thing to the bedroom.”

Thankfully, Chuuya doesn’t need a lot of intellectual capacity to lift

the glass and down it in one go. Dazai's content smile makes his chest feel even warmer than the booze. Like that, their eyes locked on each other, they make their way to the bedroom, Dazai walking backwards the entire time as if to make sure Chuuya is still there. As if Chuuya could leave. Right now, or ever.

Only when they're inside, does Dazai pause to turn on the lamp on the drawer against the wall, draping the room in gentle, intimate lighting. Even though Chuuya sleeps here several times a week, it's been ages since he has been here for anything other than that. He only ever fooled around with Yosano and Dostoevsky in their rooms–or the apartment, but never here.

Maybe Dazai is wondering about the same thing, his observant eyes wandering over the bed and the curtains and the nightstand on his side of the bed as if to check whether any of it has been touched since he last slept here. After a moment, he turns back to Chuuya and coaxes him over to the bed with a nudge of his head, pushing him down to sit down on the edge as he lifts one knee and places it between Chuuya's thighs.

"No touching, okay?" he whispers, staring down at Chuuya.

And what else is there to say besides, "yes"?

Chuuya's thankful for anything that he can get. Anything at all.

"Good boy," Dazai murmurs, and brings his lips down to his.

The kiss, unlike Dazai, is shockingly soft, the teasing weight of his mouth against Chuuya that retreats every time he tries to deepen it. This here is Dazai's performance. His show. His stage. Every step precalculated in that pretty head of his. Every reaction that he draws from Chuuya planned and intentional.

But that's okay.

Control is something precious. Whether it's given or taken. And Chuuya's happy to participate in this at all if he has to be honest. Happy to have Dazai dressed up for him, putting on a show for him, *here* for him, and kissing him despite the resentment that lingers inside him still. That will linger for a while.

Dazai swings up one thigh, then the other, so he ends up half-kneeling over his lap. All Chuuya needs to do is slide his hands around his waist and down to his ass to bring him closer, and rock their groins

together, but he knows that it's not what Dazai wants from him right now. And Chuuya…

The only thing he wants more desperately than a tiny bit of relief for the growing tent in his pants, is to be *good* for Dazai.

Dazai sighs against him, long fingers tracing the slant of Chuuya's cheek as he coaxes his lips into parting and lures his tongue into his mouth, ripping a shuddering groan from the very bottom of his chest when he sucks on it. Chuuya's hands curl in the sheets to stop himself from doing something stupid like breaking his promise not to touch him.

Instead, he lets Dazai undo him piece by shivering piece, all hot, slick tongue, mouth, and lips, hissing when Dazai's weight finally comes down on top of him, rubbing so perfectly against his crotch that –

That it takes Chuuya a few crucial seconds to notice the square-shaped piece of metal pressing against his heart.

Pulling back a breath, he lowers his gaze down and sees the barrel of a gun squeezed between them. The same long nimble fingers that were just caressing his face wrapped around it. Not a single tremor of nerves.

He drags his eye back to Dazai, his face hidden by a mask of gentle patience, and raises his brows. "Really?"

"As real as life," is the calm answer.

"You still need to hurt me back," Chuuya says. "That it? That's what all this was about?"

"I need you to be *honest*," Dazai counters, and there is the first flicker of something real underneath his cool façade. A tremor. A taste of all that festering anger. "You know, the thing that you keep demanding from *me*."

So, it's about that.

Chuuya should have known there was a reason why Dazai has been so docile lately, even after all the effort he went through to prove a point back at his apartment. How stupid of him to actually believe that Dazai meant what he said about needing some time. When the only thing he needed time for was…

Evidence.

Time to collect *evidence*.

And, apparently, the conclusion that he came to is that Chuuya's withholding something.

It's not like Dazai is wrong about that. There is just a word of difference between withholding information like, say, being the only living heir of a former mafia boss, and not telling someone that your body is changed, and broken, and getting weaker and weaker and --

And that something is happening that Chuuya doesn't even understand himself.

He understands corruption. He doesn't understand how it's possible to be still alive while something deadly is cursing inside him and draining him of life.

He doesn't understand what drove him to activate something that would for sure kill him.

He doesn't understand how he could be so careless.

He doesn't *know* what to do about it, so how in the world is he supposed to explain that to Dazai?

"I want honesty from you because you feel the need to put on an entire act just to ask me a question that you could have asked without all your damn lies."

Dazai's bottom lip curls. "I wouldn't have to if you didn't insist on lying. You're *lying*, Chuuya. Do you honestly believe I'm blind enough not to see it?"

"I think that you're asking for things you have no business asking for *like this."*

"Fine. Then I'll shoot you. Let's see what you think about it with a bullet inside you."

Chuuya pushes forward until his forehead is pressed against Dazai, their abilities merging to create a reality in which there is no *for the tainted sorrow* that can hold back a bullet headed his way. "Pull the fucking trigger."

Dark eyes stare numbly back at him, absorbing his words just like

everything else around him. He has the chance to hurt Chuuya. Fire an entire round into him to get what he wants. To kill him even. Instead, everything is still. Quiet. Even the air seems to hold its breath.

Then Chuuya exhales a dry, bitter huff and pulls back. “Yeah, didn’t think so.” After shooting Dazai another dirty look, he slides out from under him, driving a hand through his hair as he gets to his feet. “You’re really trying to push me, aren’t y—”

A shot rings through the air, cutting him off.

Blinking, Chuuya glances down at himself and watches his fingers come away with blood when he touches his stomach.

Blood.

There is blood leaking from his body.

“You –” His knees wobble under him. Chuuya lets out a choked whimper as he forces his legs to back away, as far away from that *little bitch* as possible. “You *shot* me.”

Dazai has the gall to look surprised by this revelation, eyes wide as they dart from Chuuya to the gun in his hands. “I-I thought -- why didn’t you use your ability?” he ends up hissing. “I wasn’t touching you anymore!”

“Why did you shoot me?!” Chuuya snaps back, blindly grasping the threshold of his room, tainting the pristine white color in rusty, dark red.

“Because I wasn’t touching you! Because you were supposed to deflect it!”

“Guess it’s my fault then for –“ God, it *hurts* like a motherfucker. “— t-trusting you not to fucking *shoot* me!”

“Chuuya,” Dazai says, scrambling to his feet like he’s *worried* and grabbing a towel from the pile of laundry sitting on the dresser. “You’re bleeding.”

“I’m aware of that! You shot me!”

“We have to, uh, compress the –”

“Don’t fucking touch me,” Chuuya growls out with a heaving chest

when the bastard tries to come closer and get his hands on him.

But the thing about bleeding out from an actual hole in your body is that it renders you powerless. Chuuya can barely keep his body upright, let alone fight off Dazai who kneels down in front of him and slaps away his hands without so much as batting an eye.

“How about we put aside our differences for now and focus on saving your life, huh?” Pressing the towel against the wound on his stomach, Dazai searches out his gaze, offering him a crooked smile. “How does that sound?”

“It sounds like I’m going to f-fucking strangle you once I get the bullet out of me. You shot me!”

“Well, you let me!” Dazai shouts back, his voice too high-pitched to be yet another performance. “I threatened you with a gun and you didn’t even think to use your ability?”

“I trusted you!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t!”

“I can see t-that now.” A low, frustrated snarl slips out of Chuuya’s throat as he rests his head against the doorway. Talking, breathing, moving–everything burns. Tearing him apart from the inside. Something he tried so hard to avoid after getting back on his feet, and something that is now happening to him all over again because he made the mistake of turning his back to Dazai.

Dazai, of all people.

“Hey, don’t close your eyes on me now,” he hears the bastard babble. “It’s just a silly, little gunshot wound. That’s nothing to you. Right?... Right, Chuuya?”

“Shut up,” he murmurs, struggling to keep his eye open when it would be so easy to rest it for a bit. Let those hands that are trying to drag him down and under keep him for a while. Just until he feels better again.

“That’s good. Keep telling me how much you hate me.”

“That’s the p-problem.” His fingers try to curl around themselves to no avail. “I still don’t. Because you’re so…“

“Because I’m what?”

Chuuya jerks his chin towards his pocket. “My phone. Call… Yosano.”

“Okay,” Dazai mutters more to himself than Chuuya. “Okay, I’m just going to…”

Dazai not knowing what to do is a strange sight. It would be a satisfying one too if Chuuya’s flimsy lifespan didn’t depend on it, which is why he bites down that bittersweet taste of glee and jerks his chin at him to get his attention. “Press my own hands against the wound,” he rasps out. “You can use the phone… one-handed.”

“Okay.” Dazai nods, blinking rapidly. “Okay.” Chuuya hisses when some of the pressure against his wound slips away, the air a searing pain when it comes in contact with his skin. “I’m just going to take your phone and call Yosano. Easy peasy. We can do this.”

Chuuya watches Dazai’s blood-smeared fingers type in his passcode and scroll through his contact list. The fact that Dazai somehow hacked into his phone without so much as a second of thinking barely registers in the fog of his brain. It rings. Chuuya’s shallow breaths echo like sirens in his ears.

Yosano picks up after two more rings. “I didn’t expect a call from you tonight. What’s up?”

Dazai’s eyes slide towards him. Chuuya blows out a heavy breath. “I need you here. Something…” He swallows past the dryness in his throat. “… happened.”

“I’m on my way,” she says right away, no questions asked. He hears the muffled sounds of her heels rapping against the floor. “Tell me what happened.”

“I… I kind of got shot.” Chuuya ignores the man across from him so he can focus on stringing words together. “Lower stomach. Side. I don’t think that it’s… too bad but… I need you to come anyway.”

“Okay. Uh, you’re awake and alert, so that’s good. I need you to stay calm until I get there, you hear me?”

“I’m calm,” he snaps weakly. “Just tell me what to do.”

“Can you check whether the bullet has an exit wound?”

Chuuya's gaze finds Dazai. "I can," he speaks up after sucking in a breath and forcing out a nod. "I can check."

"Dazai's there? What…" Whatever conclusion she comes to gets cut off by a low curse. "Don't move him too much. Just carefully feel whether there is an exit wound."

"I'm feeling blood, but I think it's from the…" Dazai and Chuuya make a sound at the same time, Chuuya because he hisses with pain, Dazai because – "There's an exit wound. I can feel it!"

"Good," Yosano's voice says from the phone. "That's good. That means either the person who shot you didn't want you dead or that they were incredibly *stupid*."

If it took her mere seconds to figure out what must have happened, then the fact that Chuuya only realized once he'd already been hit by a fucking bullet is even more pathetic. It's true what they say. Love does make you blind. *Blind and idiotic.*

"Now you need to compress both wounds to minimalize the bleeding as much as possible. Can you do that?"

Dazai's head frantically snaps to glance around them, chest sagging when he spots something. He still grimaces as he presses an old grey hoodie to Chuuya's back. "You owe me… a fucking hoodie," he breathes out.

Dazai meets his gaze, adam's apple bobbing with a gulp. Silent.

"I'm getting into my car as we speak and the medical team will be right behind me." A pause. Then. "Chuuya, do you need me to gather a defense force as well?" Meaning: are you safe? Do you want the hitman gone?

And despite it all, Chuuya doesn't even waste a thought on it. "No." He avoids the baleful pair of eyes that are locked on him. "Just… come here."

"Okay. Dazai, make sure he doesn't move. Keep him conscious and calm, but still. Got it?"

"Not even to the med-bay you've set up here?"

"No moving at all." Her voice comes out harsh, leaving no room for any rebuttals, and Chuuya suspects it's not only because of the

question. “The equipment is only useful to people who know what to do with it.”

“Okay,” Dazai says, nodding. “Okay. Understood.”

“I’ll be there in ten. Can you two hold out for that long?”

“We’ll be… fine,” Chuuya grits out through clenched teeth even though his body feels everything but.

He’s never been shot before. His ability practically made him bulletproof. Other wounds? Sure. But after he got stabbed, he kept a thin layer of *for the tainted sorrow* protecting him at all times.

Ironically, he’s managed to get himself into the same damn situation all over again. Hit by someone he trusts. By someone he loves. By someone, he didn’t feel the need to protect himself from. It’s always those people and those betrayals that hurt the most.

And still.

“I’m feeling great.”

At least Dazai stayed.

At least he has the decency to look miserable even if does jackshit to improve the situation.

Yosano stays on the line but mutes herself. Chuuya has to bite back a groan when he realizes what a political nightmare this will turn into if it gets out that the boss of the port mafia, the one with the gift to manipulate gravity, got *shot*. He’s been through enough assassination attempts before to know how dangerous it is for his people to remember that he’s as human as the rest of them, and not the untouchable leader that will survive any kind of attack. Keeping his post-corruption state under wraps has already been hard enough. This will just…

“Don’t think too much,” Dazai murmurs across from him. “Stay with me.”

Chuuya drags his gaze to him with a weak glare of contempt that probably only looks half as malicious. But he doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t know what in the world could possibly express how much he loathes Dazai and how much he doesn’t at the same time.

Not like Dazai ever needed words to understand him. The smile he conjures up reeks of concealed terror. “Thank god you have Yosano, right? You’ll probably feel even better once she’s through with you. You’ll be as fresh as a newborn. I’m basically giving you a mini-vacation from your boring routine.”

Chuuya stares back at him, gauging whether his words are genuine this time or whether he’s *still* collecting evidence. Whether all of this--his surprise, his guilt, his fear--is just another part of his plan to get to the bottom of the truth. Gauging how good of a liar the person in front of him is. Has been the entire time.

“Chuuya,” the same person murmurs though, so many layers of emotions packed into two syllables that it seems impossible to fake something like this. And yet if someone could, it would be Dazai. “You can’t hate me for this.”

“*Oh, fuck you*… you shot me, and I can’t –”

“You promised me another chance. This is it. This is the chance.” Dazai’s eyes bore into him like searing embers. “You *promised.”*

And the thing is: he did.

Chuuya might not have made that promise with *this* in mind, but he made one, nonetheless. What Dazai could his one last chance for was never part of the deal.

“Fine… here’s your chance,” he sneers weakly. “Doesn’t mean I can’t imagine strangling you anyway… Now we both hate each other… you finally satisfied?”

Judging by the forlorn look in Dazai’s eyes, he isn’t.

Yeah.

Chuuya isn’t either.

This sucks.

So much about *loving Dazai is easy*.

The thought causes something in the back of his head to click. Pieces fall together.

Because Chuuya looks at Dazai and he wants to wrap his fingers around his throat and squeeze until he gets something real out of him.

And then he wants to wrap him up in his arms and never let him go. Keep him there so he is *his* to hate, *his* to punish, only his for the rest of eternity.

And Dazai looks at him and sees the same.

A ragged sigh slips out of him, coaxing his eyes to flutter closed as he rests his head against the door frame.

The bastard actually did it.

He somehow managed to even the scales between them. Get them on the same page. And all it took was a bullet.

“Hey, hey, hey, this isn’t time for you to take a nap now! Come on, eyes open and on me!”

“Shut up,” he mumbles. “I’m tired of…” His next exhale drags on forever, but the air that seeps into his lungs when he breathes in tastes sweet. Cotton candy, strawberry, and vanilla. A lot like Dazai. “… seeing your face.”

Cotton candy…

“Chuuya,” Dazai says again, and it’s strange how his voice seems to be closer and yet worlds away at the same time.

Strawberry…

“Don’t you dare pass out on me now! Open your -”

… and vanilla.

“- eyes.” Chuuya’s body goes slack under him instead. Dazai stares. *“Chuuya?”*

But Chuuya doesn’t answer him.

Dazai has been imagining this scenario for the last fifteen minutes, terrified that he actually did it this time. Ruin the only person on this planet who could possibly accept him just the way he is, clinical depression, personality disorders, murder attempts and all, but now that it might be actually happening right in front of his eyes, his entire body feels with crippling dread.

Chuuya can’t die because of a *bullet* wound.

He is the most powerful person in this city, for crying out loud.

He has an ability that is supposed to help him regenerate quicker than most people.

This is a bad TV trope to kill off gay characters, not *real life*.

No.

No.

Not like this.

He can't just –

No.

No, no, no, no –

Somewhere he registers the sound of the door bursting open, followed by a chorus of voices, all loud, hurried, and firm, yet somehow cloaked in a slow-motion echo. He only realizes where it comes from when someone kneels down next to him, Yosano, leaning over Chuuya to check something. His pulse. His breathing. His pupils. And then –

"We have a pulse. Let's move, people."

And time returns to its merciless pace.

Hands start doing compression, Dazai gets shoved aside, and he barely manages to blink one, two, three times before a team of four lays Chuuya on a stretcher and carries him away. Fingers slippery from all the blood, Dazai has to leap to his feet so he can catch a second of Yosano's attention before it's too late. The eyes that land on him when she whirls around are cold steel.

"You'll just use your ability, right?" Because on some level he understands. He thinks he does. But on another level, it doesn't make sense why all these people are here when Yosano can just –

She can just… fix him.

"Right?" he tries again. "He'll be fine again in five minutes?"

Yosano says nothing.

And that reveals more than any words ever could.

She says nothing even when she turns back around, jogging after her team and banging the door of the room shut so Dazai won't follow.

He doesn't try to enter.

Standing here eats him up like a parasite. Helpless. Useless. And so incredibly stupid. But he has enough common sense left to foresee that there is nothing he can do to reverse what's already been done. The only thing he can do is let Yosano do her job.

Rooted to the spot like a frozen statue, he stares at the puddles of blood on the floor for a long time. Until eventually, the door of the apartment opens again. This time, the footsteps belong to Odasaku. Dazai still doesn't turn around even when a hand lands on his shoulder.

"They in there?"

Dazai gazes into space.

"Are you okay?"

The space gazes back at him.

"Dazai, hey." Odasaku gently steers him around to face him. Dazai stares through him. "He's going to be okay. Akiko's one of the best there is. He's in good hands."

Dazai's eyes flicker up until his friend's face sharpens. "But she's not using her ability." The words taste like ash on his tongue. "Why isn't she using her ability?"

Oda looks at him. Silent.

Sometimes it's harder to get a read on him than others. Not because he has crafted a mask to hide what's actually underneath but the exact opposite. Odasaku is honest to the point of not having to read him because it's easier to just ask. To people like Dazai who are trained to always look deeper, to not trust what they see at first glance no matter who it is, this makes for a complicated case.

Right now, Odasaku's silence *is* the answer.

It's the silence of a person who is aware of a truth, deep inside their guts, even though no one ever told them the truth out loud. Like knowing that death will be peaceful even though no one ever came

back from to it to confirm that theory.

It's the same silence that has been ringing through Dazai's ears for a while now.

Something…

Something, something, something is happening right in front of him.

"Come on," Odasaku eventually murmurs. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Dazai lets him steer them towards one of the bathrooms. The same place where Chuuya once sat him down and washed his hair for him when he had no energy to do it himself. The room is messy while still being clean, smelling like Chuuya's shampoo, citrus and cider and earth, and soft towels. Modern, expensive but still cozy. Homey.

It used to be warmer though.

Dazai gets pushed to sit down on the edge of the tub. Odasaku cleans his fingers with a warm, damp towel. It doesn't make a difference. In the end, Chuuya's blood will still cling to his fingers.

Once that's done, Odasaku leans against the sink and regards him for a long moment. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Dazai glances at his hands. They are deceptively clean. "No."

Odasaku accepts his refusal to speak. He must have his suspicions about what happened, and still, he stays, lets Dazai be upset about something *he* has done, and the last person who gave him this kind of space –

The air gets stuck in Dazai's throat as his lungs tie themselves into knots. Dazai presses his fist against his mouth to smother the ragged noise that breaks free from the back of his throat. Something broken and ugly and rotten. Something that has been festering at the bottom of the well inside him, his personal watering hole, for as long as he remembers.

He knows self-pity. He knows hatred. He knows loneliness. He knows nothingness. He even knows anger now.

But he's never felt disgust of this caliber before. Like waking up in the morning and realizing that you smothered your newborn baby in your sleep. Like coming off a trip only to see your partner in crime dead

next to you, eyes lifeless, and dried up vomit stuck to their chin. Like looking at the mirror and seeing that it's been *you* all along. You, who has been and always will be the problem.

One moment, the air is cutting Dazai to shreds from the inside out, the next he's staggering to his knees in front of the toilet, stomach emptying itself violently like it, too, is repulsed to be stuck inside someone so horrible.

When there is nothing left to give, Dazai lets out a tired breath. A hand is rubbing his back. A hand that is too kind.

"Feeling better?"

"No," he whispers. If all he had to do was throw up to erase the last few hours, he'd willingly stick his fingers down his throat again just like in the old times, and become friends with the toilet. But life isn't a fairytale. And nausea continues to cling to his intestines even though he is physically empty.

"I'll get you a glass of water," Odasaku says and rises to his feet.

Out of the corner of his vision, Dazai sees the door open. Pushing himself up on his wobbly legs, he looks at Yosano.

For once, she is not the picture-perfect definition of pretty and perfect. Today she looks terrifyingly human. Sweaty bangs are plastered to her forehead, the mascara around her eyes is smudged, and her features leak exhaustion. Her gaze when it locks on Dazai is a startling reminder of the way his grandparents used to look at him.

Something to watch but never approach too closely.

Something to feed so it will behave but never to coddle.

Something terrible.

"He's stable for now," Yosano says. "We'll move him to our medical facility in the HQ and monitor him."

Dazai's chest sags, relief filling him like the smoke of a drug. It quickly evaporates into dust when she blocks him from leaving the bathroom. "No. You're not going anywhere until you tell me what happened."

"Akiko," Odasaku says, but that only earns him a cold glare.

"I'm waiting, Dazai-kun."

Sniffing lightly, he folds his arms over his chest. “Why bother? I’m sure you’ve already painted a pretty accurate picture of everything in your head.”

Her face twists into a blistering flash of fury as she takes a step closer, crowding him until her glare is a breath away. She’s a head smaller, and still, Dazai feels like he’s looking at someone above him. “You’re lucky you’re still standing here. Free and in one piece. Lucky that I didn’t order our people to shoot you on the spot for what you did.”

Every reply that comes to his mind doesn’t dare come out of his mouth. Because she is right. He doesn’t like that it’s coming from anyone other than Chuuya, but he agrees. Someone should have fired a bullet through him too.

So he lets out a breath, shrugging weakly. “Arrest me then. Shoot me. I don’t care what you do, Yosano-san. I’m still not going to talk to you about this.”

“You…” She stabs a finger into his chest, baring her teeth. But that’s all she does. “You should be very thankful to have someone like Chuuya care about you because if it wasn’t for him, you’d be dead right now.” After another withering glower, Yosano spins on her heels. “Don’t bother trying to see him. I’m not letting you step *a foot* into his room,” she adds before banging the door shut.

Behind him, Odasaku sighs, massaging the spot between his brows when Dazai glances at him.

“Do you hate me now too?”

“I don’t hate you, Dazai. I just wish you would have found some other to deal with your problems.”

Dazai lets himself sink to the floor and sit down, shoulders slumping over himself. “Maybe you should though.”

Before he has the chance to ruin Odasaku as well.

Chapter End Notes

I'm taking Dazai and running away with him so he won't hear all the mean things you guys are going to say about him ～(˘▾˘～)

Next up we have:
- a realization

- a compromise
- a plan

Chapter 23: a Life of Much Shame

Chapter Notes

So heyyy....

Warnings: recreational drug use

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai's has been a life of much shame.

He came into the world as the frail and sickly child of a man that should have been too old to go around and impregnate people and a woman that worked in one of the port mafia brothels. Maybe it was that combination of biology – someone who only wanted him as a living insurance for his empire and someone who didn't want him at all but was forced to have him anyway – that is responsible for all his defect: the body that stubbornly remained weak and lanky no matter how much his tutors tried to make the opposite happen, the ability that took from others, the chronic boredom that not only sucked all the air out of the world but out of Dazai, too.

Perhaps that is why – no matter how often he has tried to escape from the rotten truth – he always poisons everything and everyone in his surroundings. A palsied, little flower that feeds of others' vitality only to spend its long life in desolation.

That is also why Dazai wishes Odasaku would stop poking his arm and trying to get him up from the carpeted floor in his bed room before he ends up as collateral damage. Instead of vocalizing that though, he just makes a low, wailing sound when a hand shakes his shoulder for the tenth time that evening.

Poisonous little flowers don't speak.

"Come on, Dazai. At least get up from the floor and lie down on the bed."

Dazai squeezes his eyes shut harder in reply.

"Or I could just pick you up…"

"Don't," he is forced to say, shaking his useless head. "Leave me be. The ground is where I belong."

There is a sigh above him. Dazai hopes it means that Odasaku has given up on his suicide-watch and will now leave but alas. He sits down next to him instead, the weight of his gaze drilling into the back of Dazai's skull. Eventually he asks, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"What is there to talk about?" Dazai murmurs, more to himself than anyone. "I shot Chuuya. There. End of story."

"We could talk about the guilt you're feeling right now. Or what you plan to do with it."

"I plan to lie here on the floor until I wither away and die."

"Hey."

That might have not been the wisest thing to say in front of the man who won't leave his sie for more than five minutes because he thinks Dazai will find the sharpest object in the vicinity and slit his wrists with it. But it is the truth. And for some silly reason, telling Odasaku the truth has become the rule rather than the exception.

Dazai doesn't want to get up and do something with the guilt festering in his heart and face the consequences of his actions and apologize. He wants to simply rest and blink out of existence. Disappear. Vanish from history until there isn't a single trace of him left here anymore.

Unfortunately his ability is to nullify other peoples gifts and not to make his innermost desires come true.

Dazai rolls around to face his friend and regards him with a flat gaze. "Would you please just shoot me?"

"No can do," Odasaku replies with the same flat tone.

"Why not?"

"I'm not in the business of killing people anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because I made a promise to myself to not do that anymore a long time ago."

"Why?"

"I can't call myself a writer while at the same time murdering the very same beings I'm trying to write about."

“Why not?”

“The point of writing is to tell a story about people who are alive, not dead."

“Why not? Vampire aren’t living beings.”

“But they were alive once.”

“Why?”

“Why they were alive?”

A nod.

“No reason. You just get born and then you live.”

“Then why try so hard to stay alive? It’s pointless. Life is as meaningless as death. You just get born and then you just die. So why won’t you just take out your gun and fire a bullet through my brain? What’s stopping you from helping out a friend?”

“My life is better with you in it. That’s why.”

Dazai’s lips flatten in –

In what, he doesn’t know. What he does know is that Odasaku is either lying or that he is naïve, but both options boil down to the same thing: he will get poisoned. Some day. It will happen. And by then it will be too late.

So he places his cheek back on the floor where it belongs and loses his stare in the big, wide nothing because arguing with Odasaku is frustrating when the man always manages to say such terrible things.

“If you really thought life was pointless, you wouldn’t be on the floor right now. So don’t ask me to something that would make me feel the same things you do at the moment.”

Dazai’s lungs squeeze around his exhale. “Just go, Odasaku.” As pointless as life is and has always been, there has always just enough cowardish laziness keeping him from putting an end to it. That won’t change any time soon.

It is easy for people to misinterpret Odasaku's calm, blank-faced exterior as pliancy and submission, but the truth is that he is just as stubborn as everyone else, just quiet enough to fool the majority. Yet

he does not fill the oxidizing silence in the room with empty words either.

Chuuya dreams of ashen skies, blank pages, and a bullet passing through him in slow motion. Never fast enough to kill, only to make him experience every second of it over and over.

Over and over.

Over and --

“There he is. Hey. Good morning, sunshine.”

Dragging his heavy eyelids open is like escaping sinking mud, virtually impossible, frustrating, and painful. And his only reward for that accomplishment is pain. More of it. He groans quietly, then winces in pain because even that hurts. The only thing he can do is breathe in and out.

“Shhh, rest.” Yosano’s voice again. “You’re fine.”

“Ouch,” he mumbles.

“Want another dose of pain killers?”

Chuuya has been trying to keep his hands off them when it’s not necessary. They always make him way too woozy for his liking. Not to mention that the path to getting addicted to these things isn’t a narrow one, and the last thing he needs is an addiction on top of everything else, but right now, anything tastes better than the pain that’s throbbing through every nerve in his body.

Anything.

“Please.”

Relief comes hand in hand with the sickly-sweet taste of hazy sleep dragging him back under. He goes willingly this time.

When Dazai gets up from the floor, Odasaku is somewhere in the kitchen by the sounds of it, still checking in on him more often than necessary and apparently still growing suspicious to see him move at all.

“I’m just going to the bathroom to pee, so relax,” Dazai tells him without bothering to look at him. “I’m not going to tinker a knife out of the mirror.”

“Are you hungry? I cooked us lunch.”

“Hungry for oblivion.”

“I’ll set the table for two then.”

After the door falls shut behind Dazai, separating him from the warm presence of his friend – his only one, he just stands there for a few moments, wondering if he should perhaps really tinker a knife out of the mirror. He has been so consumed by anger for the last month, by anger and grief and jealousy and betrayal, that welcoming that familiar haze of numbness back into his system is both a blessing and an inescapable curse. It’s so *easy* to bury it all in the depths of soul, to not feel that guilt that’s lapping at him with its yellow fangs and rotten breath. And it’s even easier to let the big empty consume everything else, too. The small joys of life. Reading a book when it’s raining outside. Taking the first sip of boba tea. That brief rush of happy chemicals when his shopping spree gets delivered. Watching Odasaku build IKEA furniture. *Chuuya*.

It’s so, so easy to go back to the person that he was when he drank a bottle of whiskey by himself and some fruity cocktails that he stole from sloshed college students at the bar and broke into the penthouse of an executive working for the organization that created Dazai.

He sits down in the tub, legs dangling over the edge, and fishes out the medication that he swiped from Yosano back when they all still used to live together. Like they were some kind of a big happy family. Seriously, what a joke.

Pentazocine, on the other hand, is very real.

After he swallows three of the pills dry, he lets his head rest against the wall and waits for something else to take over the numbness. A better, softer kind of numbness, the one that makes you float through marmalade skies rather than pushing you out on the ocean, with no shore and no anchors, just the endless grey sky, the bottomless darkness and you.

Eventually, Odasaku knocks at the door and threatens to come in if Dazai doesn’t come out soon, so he climbs out of the bathtub, flushes the toilet and offers his friend, who never shrugged out of his role as

his bodyguard, a wide smile before following him into the kitchen where it smells like curry and freshly-brewed coffee. He sits at the table and he drifts.

Chuuya' next awakening is less brutal, though his head is still numb from the throbbing pain pulsing through him in waves. Not the nice kind of numbness either, like the one after he drinks a glass of wine too many or passes out in the afterglow of good sex. This one sits like a thick fog in his skull and casts a suffocating shade of gray over the world, dimming everything, leaving it lifeless.

He stares at the ceiling for some time before he remembers to turn his head, scan the room he is in, sterile but flooded with light, and recall his last memories.

Something about candy cotton… and Dazai… and… his eye wanders down his body.

Ah.

Something about the bullet that the pest fired through him.

The door opens and Yosano enters with a stride, donning a lab coat and scrubs. The clothes suit her perfectly, though Chuuya doesn't miss seeing her in such a context. "I see you're awake. How are you feeling?"

“Like I’ve been run over by a freight train.” Chuuya grimaces. He sounds the part too.

“That’s common when you get shot,” she murmurs with a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “You had me worried for a second there, you know. I thought we were past this.”

“Me too,” he murmurs, taking a deep breath before turning his head. “How long was I out?”

“Two and a half days.”

Groaning, he tries to sit up, only for Yosano to push him right back. “The port mafia is fine. We’ve kept it running without any issues, and no one but a few select people knows what happened. Rest.”

“But –”

“Rest, Chuuya, or I’ll sedate you.”

Chuuya gives up and lets his eye flutter closed again. For now. He will need that strength when he's ready to leave the bed. “No problems?”

“No.”

A pause.

“Send Dazai here,” he says, voice hoarse and cracked. “I need to see him.”

Yosano simply stares at him. Quite judgmentally as well.

“Hey, I’m not asking. Bring him here.”

"Is that really the best idea?”

Is it? Hell no.

But it doesn’t matter.

Never has. Never will.

“Just –” He winces when he moves too dramatically for his body, a flare of white-hot pain stealing his breath. It is only with more force that he is able to rouse his lungs again. “Just get him here, damn it.”

“God, all right, but only so you won’t rupture any of your stitches,” Yosano mutters, gently pressing him back into the pillows behind him. “I’ll send for him in a minute. I’m just…” She pauses. “I’m just worried about what he’s doing to you. About what he’ll continue to do as long as he doesn’t know the truth and as long as you two keep having this fight over and over.”

“You’re being over-dramatic. I’m a big boy. I can survive Dazai and his mood swings.”

“He shot you, Chuuya,” she snaps, a fierce light shining in her eyes. “And if he had aimed anywhere closer to your damn heart, I wouldn’t have been able to bring you back. Do you understand?” Then, more quietly: “Fyodor was right. That boy will ruin you.”

Something about that makes Chuuya's brain click like a camera shutter. This isn't about whether the statement is right or wrong. Not about whether it’s anyone’s business but his own. Not about Dazai. But it’s about how she said that *Fyodor had been right,* murmuring the words like she had thought about them a thousand times already.

For the first time, he questions whether his blind faith in his second in command was perhaps a mistake. Not because she isn't fit for the job -- she is. But because trust is a precious currency that not everyone is willing to spend, especially in this business where the stakes are so high and the players are so numerous.

The silence in his head grows louder with every epiphany - yet his heart breaks quietly.

Fyodor was right.

A rat is a rat.

That means Dazai was right, too.

He schools his expression into something calm and neutral. “Get Dazai here. Now.” His voice is soft but leaves no room for any more discussions.

At last, Yosano gives him a nod. “I’ll call for him.” She leaves the room without another word.

Chuuya counts the minutes. A total of twenty-two minutes pass before the door of his room creaks open, revealing the half-silouette of the tall, slender literature student that drunkenly but also intentionally broke into his apartment more than a year ago. Only half, as he stands in the threshold clutching the door handle, staring at Chuuya from a safe distance like he might be executed if he gets closer.

As if Dazai were ever afraid of death.

“Well?” Chuuya says dryly, pushing himself upright in bed. “Aren’t you going to come in?”

After sliding inside wordlessly, Dazai closes the door behind him, only to remain slouched against it staring blankly at Chuuya. His eyes are blood-shot, ringed with shadow, and even his tan has faded to ivory.

Chuuya pats his bedside. “Come here.”

Again, Dazai does as he’s told, slumping onto the chair next to him with the kind of dejection that is as repulsive as it is fascinating. When his big, round doe eyes find their way to Chuuya’s though, they wobble, as unsteady as cracked ice. It is this vulnerability that entices Chuuya to even consider divulging his treasure trove of secrets.

“Are you done punishing me now?”

Dazai lowers his doleful gaze, first to his own hands, then to Chuuya’s torso and the place that burns with every breath. “Yeah.”

“You don’t sound very convincing,” Chuuya snaps. “Are you or are you fucking not?”

“I’m done,” Dazai declares firmly this time, mirroring his stubbornness. “There was a moment when I thought you had actually died and –” His voice cracks. There is a heavy rise in his chest as his eyes flutter shut. "The thought that you were dead was a billion times worse than being angry with you, so yes, okay? I’m horrible, but I don’t want to punish you anymore.”

Well, it’s not the best apology in the world. Hell, it’s not even an apology, but a tentative, unstable peace treaty that might or might not be broken again at some point. But for now, it's enough. For what Chuuya needs from him, it’s enough.

“Are *you* done?” Dazai asks surprisingly.

Chuuya’s brows knit together. “I wasn’t the one punishing you.”

“With me,” Dazai says, expression reverting to an unreadable mask. “Are you done with me?”

“Is that what you wanted when you pulled the trigger? Ruin this thing before you could get hurt again?”

His answer is a ripe silence.

“I promised you another chance, and I keep my word,” Chuuya murmurs before taking a deep breath and tilting his head to look at him. “Besides, I might need another shot too.”

That obvious look of relief that flickers through Dazai’s eyes is fleeting. His brows raise ever so slightly. “For?”

“For what I’m about to tell you.” Chuuya jerks his head towards him. “Go ahead. Ask.”

And this time, he will hear exactly what he asked for. It just might not be what he wanted to hear.

Dazai gazes at him for a drawn-out moment before murmuring softly, “What’s making you so sick?”

Chuuya's not surprised that he figured out that much so far. He just wishes he would have managed to discover the rest as well. Maybe then, this would be easier.

"Have you ever heard of the name *Arahabaki?"*

A squint appears on Dazai's face. "Maybe. Something tells me I heard it once or twice when I was a child, but I'm not sure. That part of my life was a blur."

"Yeah, me too," Chuuya mutters with a bittersweet half-smile on his lips. "*Arahabaki* was the name of a scientific project of our wonderful military. They did research and experiments on abilities and singularities, and since they were in the middle of a war, they decided to try out creating some sort of freak… ability slash singularity that could be used on a weapon."

"I've heard of these kinds of laboratories," Dazai says, still squinting. "My father didn't like them very much. He said they'd become a threat to the port mafia if they somehow figured out how to create abilities without using people."

Makes sense. Weapons are much easier to yield when there isn't a living, breathing human containing and controlling it.

"They didn't figure it out. Not really anyway. They did, however, manage to create *something* and put it into a human vessel that they had stolen for this purpose."

Dazai meets his gaze. "You?"

"Me," Chuuya confirms, dragging his eye away from him. There is a reason he avoids discussing or thinking about this part of his own history. Too many memories he's not even sure are his to mourn, and too many variables, one worse than the other. "There are still a lot of details I don't know, but my life started in an underground lab where I was used as a vessel for a weapon. Then, one day, I found myself outside, naked, with a gigantic crater around me."

"Suribachi city? That happened fifteen years a…" Dazai's head tilts curiously, then his eyes widen. "They created a weapon," he echoes. "You think it was you."

Chuuya shrugs. "It must have been. I figured out years later that two European spies tried to steal 'me' away, but they ended up fighting and one of them 'released' Arahabaki, and well…" The wick of his wry

smile cuts through his skin. “I got free and millions of people paid with their lives.”

“Right. Because of everyone who committed this crime, you were the one responsible,” says Dazai mockingly.

It draws a huff out of Chuuya, though it only eases a fragment of the pressure in his chest. He can tell himself it wasn’t his fault as many times as he wants – and he has spent a good portion of his life telling himself that, but in the end, it was still something inside him that blew that hole into the ground. All that blood is still on his hands.

“Long story, short,” he resumes, “an ability isn’t the only thing I have. For a while, I had no idea about it. I mean, I lived on the streets without any memories or even a goddamn identity, and the kids who picked me up were just as clueless about all of it as me. I only found out that there’s more to it years later because those damn Europeans somehow managed to survive and decided to make a comeback.” He brings his hand up to touch his cheek. “This is where this comes into play.”

Dazai’s eyes drag over the symbols like they’re taking them in for the first time all over again. “Go on.”

“They called it corruption,” Chuuya says. “I call it the biggest mistake of my entire damn life.”

Dazai is silent, still waiting. Clever boy.

“It’s basically the manifestation of that weapon that was created in the lab. And they were right about one thing: if it had been used in the war, then we would have won without a doubt. We would have won any war with it. So when it came down to the last fight against the guild after you were gone… the one fight that would ensure Mori’s ruin and the guild’s…” He shrugs. “I used it.”

“You could have used it a thousand times before.” Dazai’s fingers clench into fists. “Why didn’t you?”

Chuuya inhales. Exhales. “Because I can’t control it. Once I say the pass phrase that triggers that thing to activate, I… I basically give over myself to it with no way out. At least not any that I know of.”

Looking at him, Dazai shakes his head. “So how…?”

“The only reason that kind of weapon can't last forever is that

eventually its vessel can't take it anymore. The human dies, and Arahabaki dies with them. End of story."

"So what you're saying is..." He blinks, unfolds his hands from the bed to his lap, and gets up to pace around the room. "... you got that magic weapon and you used it to destroy the guild, but since there's no stop button and because it takes a lot of energy, the only way out is dead. But you're here and clearly breathing which means that..." His voice cracks with a dry laugh. "Yosano. Of course it was Yosano. She brought you back, didn't she?" But he doesn't give Chuuya time to confirm or deny that guess. "She brought you back from death... but you said there was no way to completely stop it. It only stops working because you *die,* but you were brought back, so… so…"

He comes to an abrupt halt.

"So what, Chuuya?" he whispers. "What exactly are you trying to tell me here?"

Chuuya does not know either, which is the worst part. He doesn't have any science to back up his theories. Yosano still looks for some kind of answer every day to no avail. They dug for clues in the files that Mori used to keep him in the mafia, tried to locate the people that were involved with the military lab, and follow a trail of crumbs to get *anything,* but all they found were ghosts.

"I'm saying that it took me a while to recover from that," he admits with a helpless shrug. "And that I'll probably be recovering from it for the rest of my life… which most likely won't be very long."

"That's what makes you sick."

"It… yeah."

"What does it do exactly?"

"Dazai –"

"Tell me."

Chuuya rests his head against the pillow, face sagging with exhaustion. "I get tired more easily than before. Way more easily. Especially when I use *for the tainted sorrow.* It drains me and…" His fingers curl in the sheets. "It hurts. It hurts a lot. All the time."

"What hurts?"

“Everything.”

“So basically, that thing is still cursing inside you but instead of destroying everything around you, it’s only destroying you from the inside,” Dazai summarizes. “Is that what you’re saying?”

Chuuya doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to. Dazai is smart enough to figure it out on his own.

Snarling softly, Dazai stalks to his side and grasps his wrist. Touching him. Putting skin against skin. “I nullify abilities. I am a nullifier. Why isn’t any of this going away?”

“Dazai,” he tries.

“No! I’m serious. Is it going away? No? Why not?!”

“Because it doesn’t work like this,” he hisses back as he grips Dazai’s tight fist around him. “You don’t think it’s the first time I thought of when you got back? It doesn’t work because it’s not an ability. Because it’s not even natural. It’s –” His teeth grit. “— something else, and there’s no way to stop it.”

“There’s *always* a way to stop it,” Dazai exclaims. “You just haven’t found it yet!”

“I’ve tried! We did! There’s nothing!”

“Nuh-uh, Chuuya. You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to give up now that I – now that –” Fingers trembling, Dazai takes a step back, then another, and another until he’s closer to the door than to him. “You don’t get to do this.”

Chuuya stares at him. “I’m not doing anything. I’m just telling you how it is.”

“No, that’s the problem. You already gave up, and I won’t – nope. No, Chuuya. No.”

Of all the reactions, he anticipated, he wasn’t prepared for Dazai to just… turn around and leave.

Just like that.

One moment he’s there, telling him that he can’t give up, the next he’s out the door.

Frozen to the bed, Chuuya stares after him. Like he will somehow magically reappear if he wishes hard enough. Like everything will turn back to the way it once was if he closes his eye and pretends. Like Dazai didn't just leave after hearing the truth that Chuuya didn't want to give him for so long *because of this.*

This…

This.

It's lonely at the top.

That's what Mori said to him when he had no other choice but to join the mafia.

That's what Kouyou warned him of when he become good at what he did. Too good. Good enough to become Mori's second in command, groomed to take over eventually.

That's what Chuuya said when he told his friends that he didn't want this job. This life. This position.

It's lonely.

So goddamn –

The door springs open again, and he almost chokes on his own bruised heart when the person that stands on the threshold is Dazai. Again.

"You're by far the worst thing to have ever happened to me. You know that, right?" he spits, and doesn't wait for an answer to slam the door shut behind him as he stalks over to Chuuya's bed, curling his fingers in his night gown. "Every time I think I know better, you show me that I don't. Every time I think it can't get any worse, it does. Every time I think it can't hurt any more than it already does, you make it hurt *more."*

"Shouldn't have broken into the apartment of a mafia executive then," Chuuya counters, gritting his teeth. This is the one thing he's not responsible for. He never forced Dazai to feel anything for him.

"I know," Dazai snaps, hand tightening. "I know, and yet I still would do it all over again. Every single thing. Day one to today." A manic laugh erupts from his chest. "Isn't this the most idiotic thing you've ever heard?"

And *oh.*

Chuuya stares at him, unsure of what he's waiting for, just knowing it's coming.

Dazai's grip on his gown loosens. Chuuya's eye flutters shut as Dazai lifts his hand to his cheek, only to jerk open again when the bastard squeezes. Hard. “You’re not dying,” he tells him like it’s a matter of personal choice. “You must be just as stupid as I always say you are if you think you can just…” He clenches his teeth. “… parish like some wilted flower because of some damn human-made singularity.”

“Ouw,” Chuuya mutters, “stop –”

“Do you know how many times I’ve tried to die?”

“It’s not the same!”

“I don’t care! You’re not dying!”

“Maybe not today, or next week, but most likely, sooner rather than later, and the sooner you accept that, the –”

“I said *no,*” Dazai hisses, and then – once he releases his face – he actually has the gall to shove him aside in bed. Chuuya only understands when Dazai climbs on it.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to hold you now.”

“What?”

“Don’t tell me you went deaf as well.” Just as promised, Dazai wraps his arms around Chuuya, one around his neck, the other around his upper stomach, the part that thankfully doesn’t hurt with each flex of muscle. “See? I’m holding you, and you’re going to listen.”

“I don’t want you to hold me right now,” Chuuya complains with a scowl. This doesn’t feel right.

“Tough luck, I’m already doing it, and you’re going to –”

“Where do you get off on –!”

“—listen,” Dazai orders, pressing their cheeks together. “You’re going to listen because you’re a good boy.”

Chuuya finally gives up the struggle if only to stop this bitch from saying these horrible things.

“You’re not going to die,” Dazai says again. “Not as long as I’m still kicking. Do you understand that?”

“No, I *don’t*. I told you, there’s nothing to be done.”

“Oh yes? Then how about the book?”

Chuuya stiffens up.

There is a moment of silence, then Dazai murmurs, “Thought so.”

“No,” Chuuya snaps, shaking his head. “We’re not going to mess with powers that we don’t even understand yet just to save my life for *my* mistake.”

“Yes, we will,” Dazai retorts without a trace of doubt in that crafty voice of his.

“Dazai, I’m not kidding,” he warns.

He *feels* Dazai’s smile against him which makes it that much more devious. “Neither am I. Either you let me find the book to make sure we’re going to have that sappy happy ever after that we both want deep inside, or you don’t… and I find the book anyway, but instead of handing it over to you, I’ll give it to the highest bidder, and trust me, there are lot of nasty people out there waiting to get their hands on the thing.”

Hissing, Chuuya tries to shake off the damn bastard, but Dazai’s persistent and very clingy and the medication, the surgery, and his wound all take their toll on Chuuya. He can’t even fight off a stupid literature major.

“Is this a threat?”

“It’s a promise, my love.”

"Really, you want us to build our relationship based on an ultimatum?”

“I lied to you about my identity, you sent me away for nine months without asking me first, I *shot* you. As it stands, our relationship is already a burning train wreck, and you and I both know that it will never change.”

As much as Chuuya hates to admit it, Dazai is right. A toxic start of their thing is the least of his worries. It doesn't suddenly erase all his issues with finding the book either, not by a long shot, but…

It may seem selfish of him, but Chuuya doesn't want to use the time he has with Dazai working *against* him. Obviously, that comes with the much bigger problem of the book landing in the hands of someone dangerous. The part that bothers him the most though is Dazai. Of course it is.

It's always Dazai.

"Come on," the man in question urges gently, using his arms to pull Chuuya even closer than he already is. Until their foreheads are pressed together as well. "You'll say yes. Don't drag it longer than you have to."

Chuuya lifts his eye to Dazai's. "What if it makes me live but doesn't make the pain go away?"

"But you'll live," is the instant reply. "You'll stay here."

"What if I don't want to live that way?" That's a question he hasn't even dared to consider yet, but it's there behind every feigned smile, every grimace, and every damn breath, the thought of it always lingering in the back of his mind.

Because the truth is that Chuuya *doesn't* want this.

Yes, it would be fucking fantastic to have more time than he currently has. More time to live, to fight, to fuck, to love – all the things he's missed out on since joining the mafia. Fuck, since before even. He barely got a chance to live as anyone other than a killer and a criminal.

But…

Knowing that it won't last forever, that eventually, he will get to rest, is also a relief.

His attitude is more than a tad hypocritical after all the crap he has given Dazai for wanting to die -- he is well aware of that. And Chuuya from twelve months ago would beat himself bloody until he's blue in the face if he heard what he's thinking right now. It's not in his nature to accept what he is given without a fight. It even sounds wrong.

Yet the mere thought of living for fifty more years in this body seems unfathomable

So damn suffocating.

Embarrassed by how weak he's become, physically and mentally, he doesn't even want to hear what Dazai has to say about him. But when he dares to look, it's not repulsion that meets him.

The slight smile that Dazai gives him is accepting. "Say the word, and I'll go with you. We'll die together."

"Dazai, I'm serious," he mutters. "Don't say things like that."

"Do I look like I'm joking? I'm serious too." He shrugs as if he were discussing groceries. I don't want to live without you, but I won't force you to live with pain either, so."

"I'm pretty sure that's called co-dependency, and it's not a good thing."

"Says the guy who would rather have me hate him than die."

And that's…

That's very true unfortunately.

A sigh falls from Chuuya's chest. He finally lets himself relax, and sinks into Dazai's arms, resting his head against Dazai's cheek. "I'm tired, Osamu. "I don't know if the book will change that."

"But you will let me try." A grim, hopeful silence. "Right?"

"I don't like it, but you're not giving me much of a choice."

He could create a special task force of mafia subordinates to undercut Dazai, but is it worth it? Fighting someone he would rather savor his time with for the next few weeks, months, or years?

"Doesn't feel good, does it?" Dazai murmurs.

The subtle reminder makes Chuuya snort – then wince as his wound does not appreciate that. Essentially, it's the same thing he did to Dazai nine months ago. The only difference is that Dazai at least let him know in advance.

Once again, it's all about leveling the playing field.

Maybe they will actually get there someday if they keep going like that.

To that place where there are no more scores to settle because they have both hurt each other equally in all the possible ways. To that place where they can simply be with each other.

The only way to get there is through living though, pain included.

“No, it doesn’t.” He lifts his hand to Dazai’s neck, tracing the gentle slope with his fingertips. “I’m sorry for sending you away,” Chuuya says, looking at him. “I’m sorry for not talking to you. For not hearing you out. I'm sorry I took your choice away."

Staring back at him, Dazai swallows. His matted lashes flutter, once, twice, and a third time. Then he whispers, “Really?”

Chuuya has to laugh even though it aches. For someone who spent the last several weeks demanding to hear these words, Dazai looks pretty damn mystified to receive them now.

“Really,” he murmurs with a tired smile. "I don't know what would have happened if you had stayed. Whether you would be alive. Whether any of us would.” Dazai's cheek feels warm against his skin. “But I'm sorry about how it all unfolded. You were right. There were other options. I was just too caught up in my feelings to see them.”

Dazai looks at him for a long time before dipping his chin, burying half of his face in the pillow. “I guess not telling you who my father was didn’t… help matters…”

“No, it didn’t,” Chuuya agrees without missing a beat.

“I’m sorry for that too,” the idiot mumbles. “I should have known that it would blow up in my face. I did know, but…”

Now that Chuuya knows Dazai is the son of the last rightful boss of the port mafia -- if you believe in nepotism, that is -- he isn't as desperate to find out more. Curious, yeah, because when it's Dazai, Chuuya always wants to hear what he has to say, hear where he came from, and where he hopes to go. Discovering each other's secrets is no longer a matter of life and death, but a treasure hunt. A journey. The pressure is gone.

So Chuuya just lies there, rubbing letters into Dazai’s cheek with his thumb.

"But..." He clears his throat. "It wasn't something I wanted you to know."

“Because I’d get mad?”

Dazai chuckles. “I can handle an angry Chuuya. A Chuuya who doesn’t want me though…”

“Dazai –”

“I know. I know what you’re going to say. That you would have understood –”

“I would have,” he cuts in. “I do understand. It pissed me off that you kept it from me, knowing what it would look like to Mori. "Not the fact in and of itself."

“Isn’t that the same?” Dazai mutters, digging his heels in. “In the end, I would have been the son of the man that your boss had killed and betrayed. A dangerous liability. I knew how it looked, and I knew what you'd have to do to stop making it look like that."

Chuuya lets out a sigh. “We would have found a way.”

“Oh, yes? How?”

“I don’t know. Somehow. Doesn’t mean I would have ever stopped liking your stupid face,” he says with a dry huff, poking Dazai’s nose and biting the inside of his own cheek when he sees the idiot go cross-eyed at that.

But Dazai’s expression turns serious way too soon. “That’s just the thing. If I had told you… If I had told you all of it, you would have.”

“I know now and yet you’re still here lying in my bed, aren’t you?”

“That’s because you only know the tip of the iceberg. So my father used to run the port mafia once. What else do you know?” When his only answer is silence, Dazai huffs. “Right.”

“I know that you used to have play dates with another crime family from Russia,” Chuuya offers after a moment, “and that you were sent away to the countryside when you were still a kid.” Even though it wasn't any less traumatizing than growing up in the mafia.

“That’s not a lot, Chuuya.”

“I never asked for more than that. Just the truth.”

Dazai blinks, then his smoky eyes flutter closed and he subconsciously leans into the touch of Chuuya’s hand like a cat asking to be petted. “The truth is an ugly thing. Why even bother with it?”

“Because it’s also important.”

“Is that why you only bothered to tell me about your *condition* now?” Dazai asks. “Because it’s so not important?”

Having no rebuttal for that, Chuuya makes a face. “To be fair, you wanted me dead up until a few days ago anyway. Didn’t seem like you’d care much.”

Dazai frowns at him. Then he slaps his forehead.

Chuuya jerks back with a little yelp. “Ouch?”

“It’s like you’re getting progressively stupider with each day, Chuuya.”

“Yeah, maybe it’s the fact that my body’s deteriorating.”

“Not for long anymore.”

It feels like one of those key moments: the ones that decide how the rest of his – of their lives will go together. Whether they’ll manage to work out their differences once and for all or get stuck in an eternal crossfire, never letting go of it but also of each other.

But Dazai’s here, still with his arms around him even though he did just slap him, and…

Chuuya knows that they will make it.

“Sorry for that,” Dazai apologizes a moment later. “And sorry for shooting you.”

If Chuuya’s going to be honest, his pride is begging him to hold onto that particular mistake for as long as possible. One does not simply fire a bullet through his stomach and walk away with a simple apology. Life is full of consequences. Dazai should be subject to that as well, just like everyone else.

And yet…

Somehow, it feels like they’re slowly getting on the same page.

So Chuuya just nods.

“I made the pain worse, didn’t I?” It’s barely audible even in the peaceful silence of the hospital room.

“You didn’t make it better,” he decides to say. “ Let’s just settle on that.”

Dazai’s body tenses around him. His inhale is a shuddering scrape of lungs. “Is it selfish that I’m still… glad you somehow want me? It would be for the best if I just let you hate me but I don’t want that.”

“Nah. It would be more selfish if you shot me and decided it wasn’t worth it in the end. This, at least, made something good come out of everything.”

“Okay.” A few moments pass, then Dazai says, “What if you shot me in return? Would that make you feel better?”

Chuuya squints. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“You hate pain.”

“I guess I hate thought of you deciding to leave me for this even more.”

Even so.

“I don’t want to fucking shoot you, Dazai. I think you should have realized that by now.”

“Not in the heart, of course. You could try my leg. I hear that hurts. Or my knee –”

“Stop it. I don’t want to shoot you.”

“Not even a little bit?”

Well.

“Only in theory,” Chuuya says with a dry huff. “But not in reality.”

Dazai makes a ghoulish noise in his throat, something that Chuuya can’t describe but understands. A little. Apparently, he’s not satisfied with that, squirming in the bed until his fingers eventually travel

down to Chuuya's hip. "Do you want me to blow you then? Would that make you feel better?"

Chuuya has to focus on his breathing so he won't start laughing and put himself into more pain than he's already in.

"Chuuya?"

"No," he manages to say, patting Dazai's cheek. "No, it's fine."

"You don't want me to blow you?" Somehow he sounds even more insecure than before.

"Not right now. 'm tired."

"Oh, okay. So…"

"So just lie here and..." Chuuya's sigh is deep and long, but mostly relieved. "… hold me or whatever." It has been a while since he felt like this: warm, safe, basking in the soothing pressure of their bodies, and inhaling the strawberry shampoo in Dazai's chocolate hair – god, he even missed the smell of Dazai's skin at the risk of sounding like a freak. It doesn't matter if it's a hospital bed that they're lying in, far less comfortable than the bed at home, or the one he bought Dazai after the guy had to live in that scruffy dorm room of his for years, or if the bullet that forced him to stay here came from the same man burying his face in Chuuya's neck.

He never wanted a perfect life.

At the end of the day, he only wanted something that would make all the pain worth it.

(And Dazai?)

(Dazai is worth a billion bullet wounds.)

Chuuya comes to again a few hours later, struggling to open his heavy eyelids in the afterglow of his nap, and jerking back when he finds Dazai staring at him with a lopsided smile.

"Have you –" He yawns and has to slap Dazai's finger away as the bastard tries to stick it into his mouth. "Stop it. Have you been watching me sleep this entire time?"

"Not the entire time," Dazai says. "Only, like, 85% of it."

Sighing, Chuuya allows himself to drive his hand through his tousled hair. Still as silky and thick as ever. “Sleeping hasn’t gotten any better?”

“I’ve had periods at the farm when it was easier.” The *not anymore* goes unsaid. “I’m used to it, so it’s fine. It gives me lots of time to think.”

The sharp glint in his gaze as he says it reminds Chuuya of the promise he let him make: find the book.

God.

The book.

After scrubbing a hand over his face until the fog in his head clears, his gaze drifts to Dazai. “Listen, there is something else I want you to do. Besides the book.”

"Oh?"

The next words chip away at his pride once more, but he powers through. “You were right. About Dostoevsky, I mean. There's a good chance that he was behind what happened to the radio."

To his surprise, Dazai doesn't show any sign of arrogance -- not even as much as a sneered, "I told you so." In fact, as he stares back at Chuuya without saying anything, he seems almost amused.

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yes, dear, I did. I’m still waiting for the part where you tell me what you want me to do.” There is a cruel edge to his half-grin. “Or, hoping, really.”

That makes Chuuya’s abs clench –

And that hurts like a bitch.

Squeezing his eye shut, he counts to five before taking a deep breath and facing Satan reincarnated. “I want you to find out what his deal is. "It's obvious he's got a bigger agenda than he's told us, but I've never figured out the details."

“Did you tell Yosano?”

“No,” Chuuya says after a moment.

Dazai's stunned frown says it all. Though he's not 100% certain, Chuuya has this gut feeling she knows something about Dostoevsky that he doesn't, and if the port mafia has taught him anything, it is to trust his instincts when they sound alarm.

But Yosano was the last person Chuuya expected to stab him in the back.

“I will need some kind of cover,” Dazai muses, stroking his chin. That rat's too smart to not realize what's going on if I start being nice to him."

A smirk forms on Chuuya's face. “I have an idea what to do about that.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys liked this! Thank you so much for your patience with this baby, and I'll see you next time <3

Chapter 24: His Name Is Stinker

Chapter Notes

> warning: explicit sexual content, and there's a mention of implied sexual abuse towards the end of the chapter! Very implicit, but it's there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There you are, *finally*. I was starting to suspect you were disobeying orders.”

Yosano's face twists into a snarl when she stops in front of his desk. “You realize that I don’t listen to you, right?” she snaps. The only reason all that temper stays leashed is the hand on her back. From Fyodor, looking neither surprised nor enraged to be standing here.

“Technically,” Dazai lets out a dutiful sigh as he rests his chin on his intertwined hands, “you are. Chuuya made me the –”

“I know what Chuuya made you,” Yosano cuts in with a scoff. “A counselor. An *advisor*. Not the damn second in command, an executive, or even a *member*. You have no right to order us around.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you had just come when I asked you to, but you didn’t! So I had to resort to other means.”

“I have nothing to say to the very reason why the boss *isn’t* here right now.”

“Lucky for me that you have no other choice,” Dazai chirps. “Your *boss* handed over this assignment to me, so you will have to talk to me whether you want to or not.” His eyes slide to Fyodor then, awfully quiet. “Isn’t that how it works, Fyodor-kun? You would know being a crime boss yourself, wouldn’t you?”

As expected, he meets Dazai’s gaze without flinching. “I suppose so,” he murmurs, allowing himself to take a seat in the chairs across from the desk in the office that Chuuya gave him a week ago on a whim – not before drawing back a chair to let Yosano sit down, of course. “The goal of this mission is to save the boss, after all… even though I won’t pretend to understand why he let you lead it, let alone why he still lets you anywhere near him after that temper tantrum that you threw.”

Yosano agrees with a grunt under her breath. “No one understands.”

“Feelings and attachments make you do crazy things,” Fyodor adds with a pointed glance in Dazai’s direction.

Even though all three people in this room are aware that Chuuya is not the only one who has acted irrationally out of… love, or whatever it is that people call it.

Why else would someone as loyal as Yosano betray Chuuya’s trust?

Because of sex?

Dazai might not be an expert on that front – *still* – but even he knows that alone wouldn’t be enough to do something so stupid. Only those pesky human feelings can do that.

“Has everyone said their piece?” Dazai asks after another few aggravated breaths and glares.

Yosano crosses her arms, but ultimately juts out her chin and channels that steel into determination. “You really believe we can find that thing?”

“I should hope so. I have scraps of information regarding that thing from my old man. If we put out brains together and add the different pieces, we should get our hands on something solid. *So.”* He gives each of them a long, intense look. “Spill. I know you probably did more research than Chuuya wanted you to.”

Yosano and Fyodor share a brief glance.

“We might have paid a visit or two to Fitzgerald to ask him about it,” Yosano admits. A prophecy ability user told him there was a book sealed away here in Yokohama. A book with the ability to make everything that you write into it come true. The white tiger appears to have some kind of connection to it. All very vague.”

In the absence of any *new* information, Dazai raises his eyebrows. “That’s it?”

He is not at all surprised that it’s the rat that indulges him. “We also did a bit of digging on our own.”

“You mean *of your own,”* Dazai corrects with a flick of his fingers. “But go on.”

Rat.

Much to his annoyance, Fyodor takes the grammar lesson in stride. “Of our own. Thank you, Dazai-kun. We found that the book traces back to a lot of the lore surrounding abilities.” After another pause, and a wordless signal from Dazai, he continues. When word spread that abilities weren't just folklore and fairytales, people quickly began imposing religious beliefs on them. One of the largest groups with almost a million followers in Japan alone centered their beliefs around a book they called the script of creation and its creator, who they believed was also responsible for abilities and ability users.”

“So a god of sorts?” Dazai asks dryly.

“Their god, yes, but they also believed that there was another god – the one that everyone else believed in, and the false one. The evil one that didn’t want ability users to flourish.”

“And that so-called *script of creation* is the book we’re looking for then.” Dazai frowns to himself. “Are you sure you got your facts correct, Fyodor-kun? Because I had a history phase once, and I don’t remember ever seeing this in the books.”

“That’s because the government prohibited that religious group fourteen years ago. It got too popular during the war, and caused a backlash in the population: people started coming together to form opposing religious groups, only that abilities were seen as the work of the devil instead.” He smiles that arrogant smile of his. “You know how *that* goes at least, don’t you? It was splitting the people, so any talk about it was banned. From literature as well.”

How interesting that Fyodor knows so much about it, Dazai notes in the back of his head as he folds his hands into a brace for his chin. “How unfortunate. We could have talked to one of those believers, hear what they have to know about the whereabouts of the book or its creator.” He smiles sweetly at Fyodor. “You wouldn’t happen to know if there are still some left, would you?”

“We already did that.” Dazai’s eyes narrow. “Good idea though.”

Next to the rat, Yosano sighs. “I’m going to interrupt your ridiculous posturing contest because some of us are actually busy. We found some believers, but.” She shrugs. “The only thing they told us was the same story in different colors. A creator who poofed abilities into existence with the help of the book, and sometimes appears to people in dreams, and all that religious crap. Some of them said the book isn’t

available to the public because the state is scared it would turn too many people into believers. Others said that the book is hidden away because there's nothing written into it and it's not like, say, the Bible or the Quran which are sacred scriptures that tell people how to live, but that it was merely what their god used to create abilities."

"Fitzgerald apparently belonged to the latter group," Dazai notes.

Yosano nods but her expression is grim. "Pretty much, but I've heard rumors about the other version too. When I was in the army."

Dazai's brows rise, then fall again. "Do tell."

"Some of the soldiers sometimes talked about it, said that it's actually one of the reasons why war broke out in the first place, that the government had it in its possession and that it would ensure their victory in the end. I'm sure a lot of it was propaganda to keep the spirits of the army up."

It's rare to hear Yosano talk about her time in the great war. Dazai is no stranger to this particular part of her life, having done his research when she first showed up at Chuuya's doorstep, but not from the very source herself.

He finds it peculiar, the way she used to work for the same man who eventually killed Dazai's father, Fyodor's mother, and who manipulated Chuuya into joining the mafia.

It was as if Mori had tied strings to all four of them and pulled them together until they finally connected.

The only one that didn't fall prey to those surgeons' hands is Odasaku, and still, Dazai knows that Odasaku came close to it after he left that organization that he had used to work for a long time ago. Mori tried to recruit him. With no success, though.

"If the book was in the hands of the government, the special division forces wouldn't be on Chuuya's ass about it," he says after a long moment of contemplation. "Never mind that those two branches work together now and then."

"Like I said: all very vague," Yosano echoes her statement from earlier as if to prove that there is nothing Dazai can do that they haven't done already.

But that is where she is wrong.

“My father used to be a firm believer of keeping the book hidden away at all costs,” he decides to share with them casually. “People would have been able to get themselves abilities with it, and that would have disrupted the structure of port mafia of course.” His gaze lands on Fyodor. “What did your mother think of the book? I’m afraid I don’t remember anymore.”

Fyodor takes a few milliseconds more time to respond. It’s not obvious to the naked eye, only to the ones actively looking for it, and unfortunately for him, finding the book is not the only bullet point on Dazai’s agenda. “She was not a fan.”

Yosano eyes him, gluing the crack of surprise on her face back together as quickly as it appeared.

“Ah, right,” Dazai murmurs, nodding eagerly. “Now I remember. She wasn’t a fan of abilities either, right?”

“No,” Fyodor says, “she wasn’t.”

“Lucky for her, you were never blessed with that curse, huh? But then again…” Leaning back, Dazai rubs his chin. “It does make you wonder why she spent so much time with a man like my father, the leader of an ability-run organization.” Then he slaps his palms on the desk and shrugs whimsically. “Well, anyways. Unfortunately, I never heard my father say anything specific about the whereabouts of the magic book either. He was, however, convinced that every organization that came to Yokohama was looking for the book and the book only. I guess that’s what they called him the merciless tyrant of the night.”

“It might have also had something to do with the fact that he went nuts,” Yosano mutters.

Dazai grins. “Heh, maybe, Yosano-san. Maybe. I can obviously only speak of what I saw, and back then he was mostly sane. What happened once I left, I do not know.”

“Maybe your father was trying so hard to keep it away from everyone because he wanted it for himself,” Fyodor suggests sheepishly, an unnaturally sweet smile on his lips. “Have you ever considered that?”

Dazai makes his eyes grow parodically wide. “I did actually! That's the first thing I thought of. If he had ever managed to pull off such a wicked scheme, Mori would have inherited the book after slitting my old man's throat.” Two of his fingers tap against the desk. One, two. One, two. One, two. “And that’s where my area of expertise ends.”

“Or he could have hidden it somewhere far away like… perhaps in the country. Maybe with someone there to protect it even.”

“Wouldn’t that be simply marvelous, huh? If I had owned the book all this time.” He sighs dreamily. “Then you would have never existed though, Fyodor-kun, so unfortunately that theory of yours is disproven. But good thinking. Really.”

In reality, neither of their less-than-subtle accusations have any basis in reality. Considering Dazai is looking for it to suck that poison out of Chuuya’s veins says as much. What it *is* about is planting seeds of doubts and suspicion in Yosano — for both of them.

And that is why he has no respect for the rat.

The least he could do is be creative if he insists on playing the role of the antagonist in disguise.

Yosano is the one to end their unblinking staring contest, slapping the arms of her chair before rising to her feet with a sigh. “I have too many things to do to be wasting my time like this. Good afternoon, boys.”

After she leaves, Dazai slides his gaze to the man, still sitting in his chair, looking too comfortable for his liking. “How is Chuuya? Still recovering from the bullet you fired through him?”

“Taking a much-needed vacation from having to see your pasty face for nine months,” Dazai chirps back. “It’s done wonders.”

Speak of the devil: the phone in his pocket starts buzzing like a busy bee.

“*Goodbye*,” Dazai says pointedly, still holding Fyodor’s gaze.

Fyodor’s eyelids flutter – he always blinks instead of narrowing his eyes whenever he is trying to get a read on someone because he thinks playing cute will get him somewhere. At last, though, he pulls up a saccharine, very much false smile, and stands up. He topples his chair over on his way out.

Rat.

As if Dazai cares about furniture.

Once the door falls shut, he fishes out his phone and accepts the video

call. His screen is blank for a moment, then it fills with the sight of Chuuya's upper body and his kitchen in the background. Already on his feet even though he's been prescribed bed rest for another week.

"Someone's grumpy," is the first thing out of his mouth.

Dazai only notices the glaring frown he's wearing when he takes a glance at himself on the small tile on the bottom of his phone. "You would be grumpy too if you had to deal with unruly rodents."

"I take talking to Dostoevsky didn't go well then."

"It went as well as expected. I am pretty sure we're on the right track with our theory."

Chuuya's eye lifts from the sushi he has been rolling. (Because resting, doing all his work from the phone, and working out is apparently not enough for him. No, he had to take up cooking as well.) "You think so?"

"Would I say it if I didn't?"

"Just hard to believe that it's as easy as that," Chuuya grumbles. "It's never that simple with people like him."

And by that he also means…

"Well, take it from someone like him. There is probably more to it, but the gist of it is what we talked about. I'm sure of it. As soon as I mentioned that little thing, he began spouting warning signals in all directions."

Chuuya hums. "Good. What about everyone else? Anything burning?"

"Still no," Dazai diligently answers even though it's the same question every day. He would take offense that Chuuya doubts his port mafia abilities if he didn't know that it's just the kind of person that he is: the worrying type. *So much worrying.*

"You kill anyone yet?"

"Also no, but I might do that just to make you hot and bothered if you ask me again."

Though he doubts even that would get Chuuya's dick anywhere near Dazai's ass. Not as long as he is still recovering from… the wound that Dazai caused him. Which means that he is the last person allowed to

complain about that.

That's the thing about becoming more emotionally in tune with yourself: those pesky emotions don't care about any social rules.

"Save that for the people I actually want dead, not my own," Chuuya mutters after exhaling a dry snort.

"Heh, but Chuuya isn't denying it. I will remember that."

"I won't deny something that's true. I'm not a liar."

Dazai expected a rebuttal or maybe a dismissive *shut up,* so it takes him a moment to bring his brain up to date and have it come up with something to reply with. "Duly noted." His brows furrow because oh how mediocre that sounds. So he follows it up with, "What are you doing out of bed anyway? It's like you are allergic to rest."

Admittedly, that's not much better. Or relevant whatsoever.

At least Chuuya takes the sudden change in the topic in stride, always the social chameleon. "I'm already feeling much better. I don't need to lie in bed all day."

"You are feeling better *because* you have been resting."

"And I'll sit down in ten minutes, don't you worry about that. Besides, I'm just making sushi. That's nothing."

"And how much weight did you lift in bed before that?"

Not even three days after he got home Dazai caught Chuuya training his arms. *With his torso still wrapped in gauze.*

"That's none of your damn business."

"The same as the state of your precious organization is none of your business?" Dazai asks him provocatively.

"*Not* the same thing. I'm the *boss.* Of course it's my damn business."

"And I'm your –" Dazai snaps his mouth shut before the term *boyfriend* can tumble out of his mouth like a kindled grenade.

They haven't had that conversation yet. Or again. Ever since Chuuya got back from the port mafia's med bay, it's been all schemes, secret plans to overthrow the rat within their ranks, and occasional kissing

that led to a bit more here and there. And Dazai knows that it should be enough to call himself Chuuya's boyfriend and the other way around, but –

But there will always be that menacing part of him that doubts everything good that comes his way. That doubts whether Chuuya actually wants him as his boyfriend this time or whether he will change his mind and send him somewhere far away again when things get hard. Or whether Dazai is even deserving of that title after what he did.

On the screen, Chuuya looks into the camera and raises his brows. "You're my what?"

"Your, uh, recovery-mentor," Dazai lies in panic. "The person that makes sure you stay alive. Your guardian angel if you will."

Chuuya's responding stare is drier than Dazai's mouth. "You sure you're not the person who shot me?"

"That's *exactly* why I'm now also responsible for making sure you'll get better. Call it my punishment."

"How nice," Chuuya mutters. "Just what every guy dreams of hearing."

"Yes, well, I'm special like that."

"When are you planning to come home?"

Dazai savors the sweet taste of relief that pumps through his blood when they steer away from yet another volatile subject. "An hour, give or take. I want to make sure we will be ready for the ambush by the end of the week."

A small grunt comes from the other end of the line. "Don't take too long. I'm bored."

"You don't have to convince me not to work too hard."

"Good. See ya then."

The smile that Dazai offers him feels strange and awkward on his mouth, a mask that's too big for him, too heavy, but he tries to wear it for now anyway. "You will ~~"

Chuuya has never been a fan of *resting.* Not back with the sheep, though he didn't get sick as often as the other kids anyway. Not in the port mafia. And not now.

The only time he didn't resist the command to *take a fucking break,* as Yosano so kindly puts it, was when he was piecing himself back together after corruption obliterated him from the inside, but only because he was in too much pain to find enough energy to be stubborn.

His body has found a golden middle since then: hurt enough to make him aware of it, but not enough to not feel guilty when he rests. Needless to say, Chuuya hated that development as much as he hated standing still.

Which is why he finds himself grateful for his job in times like these because doing nothing at all is out of the question. There is enough paperwork and staff coordination and meetings to keep him busy even though he is confined to his penthouse suite.

He finds himself in one of such meetings on a dusky Tuesday afternoon in January as well: in his 'office' slash library, talking to the main combat forces of the port mafia via video call.

"… spent the last two days interrogating them and got some valuable information. You will find everything in the report I mailed you, but the gist of it is that they still have two operating warehouses in the outskirts of Yokohama."

Chuuya nods at his screen. "Thank you, Kouyou, and good work. Gin, Hirotsu, Tachihara –" His voice hitches a little, and he shoots the guy that's leisurely sitting on the other side of his desk and has one of his ridiculously long legs stretched out to rub along the inside of his thighs a warning look. "I'm handing the task of taking care of those warehouses and everyone in it to you."

Well, and maybe Dazai providing… manual assistance when said meetings get too boring doesn't hurt either. It only stings when Dazai's possessive streak shines through, but Chuuya can handle that.

"We'll make sure no one ever gets the idea of stealing port mafia's clients again," Hirotsu says and takes a drag of his pipe. "All these green-faced rookies think too highly of themselves these days."

Dazai's foot rubs against his dick just right, nestled against one thigh and gradually hardening, shooting a spark of heat up his spine.

Chuuya hums and takes a breath before speaking. “Akutagawa, let’s hear it.”

For some reason, Akutagawa’s background isn’t his office at the HQ like Kouyou’s, nor his apartment like the black lizard’s, but the image of a sandy beach, a blue sky, and green palms. His stoic expression looks comical in comparison. “Atsushi-kun and I have secured the three subjects in question.”

“They co-operating?”

“Not yet, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“Atsushi-kun?” Chuuya asks after a nod.

A moment later, Atsushi’s face appears on the main screen. There is a cut-off shoulder next to him that looks suspiciously like the tragic coat that Akutagawa insists on wearing all the time. Why both of them pretend to be in two different places when they are clearly not is beyond Chuuya.

“I found the name and address of the fire station that I was, uh, left in. But I didn’t find anything special. No one saw the person that dropped me off.”

Atsushi has been tasked with researching his own past. If someone out there insists that he is the guide post to the book, then maybe there is someone in Atsushi’s upbringing that will give them a clue.

“And did you talk to the orphanage staff? Did they know something?”

The weretiger boy grimaces slightly, rubbing the back of his neck. “I haven’t. Yet.”

Chuuya frowns, able to see the discomfort leaking out from him even from here. He won’t pretend that he doesn’t find it somewhat annoying — working in the port mafia means putting your own comfort aside and doing the things that have to be done, as harsh as it sounds. But he also doesn’t need creative imagination to think of a reason why Atsushi wouldn’t be in a hurry to talk to the same people he ran away from not too long ago. Just the memory of the anxious, neurotic mess he was when they found him is enough.

“You know what,” Chuuya says with a flick of his fingers, “I’ll have someone else look into it. Always better to have an outsider perspective on things like these.”

“Oh, okay,” Atsushi says, eyes wide before he gives him a few forceful nods. “Okay, boss.”

Chuuya sees Dazai raise his brows past his computer seen. And when he ignores it, the foot between his thighs none-too-gently presses against his fucking balls. Chuuya’s left-hand shoots down to wrap around his ankle, squeezing Dazai in warning. Being the person that he is though, Dazai pushes back of course –

And promptly lands on the floor the next moment.

“Sorry, that was my cat,” Chuuya says to his subordinates who must have heard the crash, offering them an innocent smile. “Such a menace.”

“You have a cat?” Atsushi asks, leaning closer to the screen like that will allow him to take a look at Chuuya’s office.

Akutagawa’s face twitches but remains blank otherwise.

Chuuya hums. “Sure do. You didn’t know?”

“I had no idea. How come we didn’t see it when we visited you? What’s its name?”

“His name is stinker, and you didn’t see him because I adopted him just recently.” Speaking of, Dazai has been suspiciously quiet on the floor. Chuuya briefly takes a look only to see him spread out on the floor like a starfish. Like he has resigned to his fate. Chuuya squeezes his foot to make sure he’s at least alive. The twitch — and the adorable glare — in response tell him that he is.

“Can I see him?” And then Atsushi turns to his left, mumbling, “*Stinker* is a funny name.”

“No,” Chuuya tells him in a voice that leaves no room for any more questions. “All right, we’re done for today. Talk to you two tomorrow.” He ends the meeting before hearing their goodbyes and rolls back with his chair to tug at Dazai’s useless leg. “Pretending to be a carpet today?”

“You hurt my bum.” Dazai lets out a melodramatic sigh. “I am trying to recover from the agony you caused me.”

Chuuya rolls his eye. “Now imagine how much it hurts to get shot.”

That makes Dazai lift his head, lips pressing into a thin line before he juts out his chin and huffs. “Fine. Chuuya wins.” Chuuya’s still looking at him with an unimpressed stare when Dazai scrambles up and crawls between his thighs on all fours, planting his hands on Chuuya’s thighs and blinking up at him. “You like calling me a cat. Why? Are you one of those people that want to fuck animals?” Before Chuuya can answer, he adds, “Are you a *furry*, Chuuya?”

“I’m not a furry,” he diligently says.

“What's the point of these ridiculous comparisons then?”

Shrugging, Chuuya snakes his legs around Dazai’s back and allows himself to cup his cheek. It’s warm. A little dry — he makes a mental note to give Dazai some of his skincare products. “Blaming all the shit that happens to me on an unruly cat is easier to say than explaining that it’s you.” His fingers drive through Dazai’s tousled hair, thick, silky, and a little overgrown. “And safer.”

“You could say you have a dog,” Dazai retorts, staring up at him before he seems to notice Chuuya’s hand and tentatively but consciously leans into it. “Chuuya seems like more of a dog person to me than a cat one.”

Chuuya snorts. “You’re not much of a dog.”

“So it has to do with me rather than a simple code name?”

Well.

“And maybe you sometimes act like a cat too,” he relents. “You know, being a little shit and all.”

For some reason, Dazai’s eyes glint back at him like he’s just discovered a shiny, new toy to play with. A look that promises danger. And it makes Chuuya’s stomach curl. “Would you like me to hear me apologize for my little faux pas again?” he murmurs softly and spreads his fingers around Chuuya’s thighs before squeezing him.

“You mean for shooting me?” Chuuya corrects dryly because there is no way in hell he will let the bastard get away with using euphemisms for his ‘little mistake.’

“A faux pas,” Dazai nods like they are the same thing. “As I said.”

“I’d prefer you own up to it instead of hearing a false-assed apology.”

“Really?” Dazai asks, leaning his left cheek against his thigh and staring up at him with half-lidded eyes and batting lashes that are anything but innocent. “Even if I purr for you…? Like a good little kitten?”

Chuuya’s eye narrows. “You and I have different definitions of an apology.”

“Is that a no?”

“It’s a *you and I have different definitions of an –”*

Dazai lets out a pathetic whiny sound and wraps his arms around his thigh to cling to it, shaking his head. *“Chuuya.”*

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

“You should be.”

“I really am.”

“Okay.”

“Really.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“But you don’t believe me!” Dazai whines. “I can sense it. I'm getting a lot of murderous vibes from you."

This time, Chuuya scoffs. “Shut up.” He winds a few of his fingers in Dazai’s bangs to make him look up at him. “Wasn’t this your goal anyway? I hurt you, and you hurt me back. Now we both hate each other a little.”

“It was,” Dazai mumbles against his thigh. “It was supposed to make me *feel* better about it, but now I feel *worse*.” He sighs. “I feel like I made the scales more uneven, which means you should hurt me again but not too badly, so we’ll be –”

“Yeah, I’m not doing that.”

Dazai makes a face before he shoves it back against his thigh, blowing out his breath dangerously close to his groin. “Fine, then be the better man. Let me suffer in my guilt forever.”

“I’ll forgive you eventually.” He chews on his lip until he notices that he is doing it and stops again. Kouyou trained him out of this habit years ago. “Question is whether you’ll be able to do the same. Not just forgive me, but yourself.”

Dazai is quiet for a long time. For so long that Chuuya has to poke his forehead. “Where are you?”

“Right here,” is Dazai’s miserable reply.

“I mean mentally. You spaced out on me.”

“I was daydreaming about sucking Chuuya’s dick.”

Chuuya blinks. “That’s what’s going on in your head when you’re staring into space?”

Dazai hums. “What else am I supposed to do think about?”

“I don’t know. Planning your next act of revenge. Scheming to take over the world. Or Dostoevsky’s ambush.”

“Ew. I do not waste my precious time on that rat.” Dazai nestles even closer, one hand unfolding from around his thigh to let his fingertips dance across his abs. “Not when I could be thinking of way more interesting things…”

Chuuya’s abs twitch. It still stings even if his wound has been healing okay, which is why he has been holding back when it comes to this. Dazai, and all the ways in which Chuuya wants to make him shut up. Or not. There has been some heavy petting here and there, but nothing more than that. Because Chuuya wants to be as physically fit as he can be when they sleep with each other. He wants to be good for Dazai — even more so, he wants to make it good for Dazai. And, unfortunately, recovering from a gunshot wound and performing well in bed don’t go well together.

“So what exactly have you been thinking of?” he can’t help but ask anyway.

Dazai hums, then lets his fingertips trace the waistline of Chuuya’s sweatpants. “About how good it would feel to have your dick in my mouth.” They wander lower. And lower. And lower. “I liked it, you know. It was nice.”

“Yeah? You like having your mouth stuffed?”

“That is what I just said,” Dazai replies primly. When he notices Chuuya’s amused expression, he blinks and clears his throat. “*Yes, Chuuya… sir…* I liked having my mouth stuffed with your big, fat –”

“Jesus, shut up.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted to hear?”

“No, I don’t want to hear you talk like you’re auditioning for a cheap porn movie.”

“But you gave me that look.” Dazai artificially lifts his eyebrows and curves his mouth into a half-smile. He looks silly. “This one.”

Chuuya scowls. “I do not look like that.”

“That’s exactly how you looked at me just now.”

“I thought it’s funny how grumpy you are even when you’re talking dirty, ‘s all.” Chuuya leans back in his chair, but makes sure to pat his cheek. “I like whatever comes out of your mouth, whether it’s dirty or…” He shrugs. “… you being a smart-ass.”

Dazai stares at him for a moment before taking a firm, determined breath. “Okay, let’s try this again.” He gently nudges Chuuya to spread his thighs, then nestles closer between them to plant a timid kiss on a bare patch of skin between Chuuya’s abs and his crotch. “I like it… yeah. Sometimes I have this feeling that I need to say something. Fill the silence. Talk.” His gaze pointedly focuses on Chuuya’s stomach instead of his face, the corruption marks that linger there. “I like that I don’t have to with a dick in my mouth.”

Driving a hand through Dazai’s hair, Chuuya already has five different replies sitting on the tip of his tongue, a lot of stuff about how he doesn’t have to talk when he is with Chuuya and that he can just be himself. But he decides against it because there might be a time and place for this kind of conversation but this isn’t it. Even if Dazai was the one to bring it up. Instead, he just hums. “I like that too.”

Dazai’s lashes flutter, eyes flickering to him briefly. “I also like making you feel good.” His right-hand slips under the waistband — gently, so gently as it skims over hot skin and the shape of his dick. “I like knowing that I can do more than just hurt you.”

Chuuya’s chest is a little tight, his smile a little sad. As easy as it would be to claim otherwise, Dazai isn’t exactly wrong. He has hurt

him. It's what he was raised to do. But it's also not the only thing that makes him the person that he is. It's just one trait among dozen of others. And someday, when Chuuya looks back at this relationship, this guy, all the good things that Dazai made him feel will stand out the brightest.

Dazai must see the way his lips part because he shakes his head — and gives Chuuya's cock a squeeze in warning that has Chuuya stifling a wince. "Don't."

"I'm not saying anything," Chuuya murmurs. "Please stop squeezing my dick like it's a stress ball."

"Oh." Dazai's grip around him softens. "Sorry."

"It's fine. Just…"

Somehow, Dazai doesn't need him to finish his sentence to understand. With one last curious look at Chuuya's face, Dazai pulls out his cock and lowers his mouth to give the flushed tip a hello lick.

He pays extra attention to the piercings that he counters, memorizing the shape with his tongue, testing just how sensitive the skin around it is, and sucking it into his mouth as he lifts his eyes to bat them at Chuuya. That alone is almost enough to make Chuuya forget that Dazai is still fairly new at this.

They had some time to explore before everything went to shit, but one blowjob doesn't make someone an expert – unless Dazai sucked someone else's dick during their time away, that is, though Chuuya doesn't think that he did. Oda claimed it was only a kiss – or a few. Whatever. Maybe it's wishful, and hypocritical, thinking.

In any case, Dazai does a stellar job of making up for his lack of experience through eagerness and creativity. He catalogs every choked breath and every twitch of Chuuya's thighs in that mind of his and uses his newfound knowledge to drag out more wordless responses again and again.

Not that he really needs to. The sight alone – of Dazai on his knees, one hand resting on Chuuya's thigh, the other wrapped around the base of his dick as he tests the limits of his gag reflex – is so oddly erotic that Chuuya has to close his eye after a minute and focus on the wet, hot sensation around his cock instead. There is just something so *intimate* about this: Dazai's enthusiastic but he is also taking his time, almost like Chuuya's orgasm is just a happy by-product of this entire

thing while the act itself is the main show – like he is savoring every second of having Chuuya in his mouth, and that –

That thought sends Chuuya's mind to dangerous heights.

He's usually not the type to wax poetics when he's in bed with someone, but Dazai has always had the tendency to turn everything upside down because here Chuuya is, getting sucked off, and all he can think about is how *personal* it feels.

Chuuya's throat is too closed up to string any coherent sentences together, so he doesn't risk embarrassing himself. He needs to do something though to reciprocate, give something in return, so he brings his fingers to Dazai's cheek, traces the slope of it with his fingertips, and lingers around the curve of his neck where he feels the bulge of his own cock.

His length twitches, Dazai makes a garbled noise in the back of his throat, and even though his eyes glisten with the lack of oxygen, he only drags his lips back to the tip to swallow him again and –

Chuuya's hand twists in the back of his hair. He pulls, hard, relieved that Dazai lets him and relieved Dazai's mouth is a snug grip around his cock as it gets dragged away. It gives Chuuya the final push over the edge.

Dazai jerks him off with a heaving chest until Chuuya's cock pulses and a white ribbon of his cum lands on his lips. As if that wasn't already maddening enough, Dazai brings the pulsing head of his dick back into the heat of his mouth and suckles like he is trying to swallow Chuuya's soul, too.

He jerks back against the chair with a low grunt. The line between pleasure and discomfort when it comes to overstimulation is thin, yet somehow Dazai manages to toe it just fine. His cheeks are hollow with suction right up until the moment they aren't; he releases Chuuya's dick with a wet *pop*.

Trying to catch his breath, Chuuya blinks up to the ceiling. Somewhere down below, Dazai pats his thigh and tucks his softened cock back inside his sweatpants.

"I liked that," he says. "Let's do that again sometime."

Chuuya's eye narrows when it drifts down to him. "What kind of porn do you watch to pull off stuff like this?"

Folding his arms over Chuuya's knee, Dazai tips his head to the side and feigns confusion. "Hm?"

"Don't *hm* me. Either you lied about being a virgin or you've learned by observing others, so. How much porn have you been watching?"

"Chuuya! You're flattering me ~" Dazai tucks his hair behind his ear and bats his stupid, long lashes at him – an obvious attempt at evading having to answer. Chuuya hates that he makes it look so pretty.

When he only gets stared down in silence though, Dazai lets out a doleful sigh. "Does it matter? Will you not like me anymore if I turn out to be a shameful porn addict?"

"Don't be stupid," Chuuya mutters, poking his forehead with the tip of his finger. "I'm just curious, but you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"Well, now that you said that, I obviously have to," Dazai complains. Chuuya opens his mouth but gets interrupted. "I'm not saying I've never used visual resources, but trust me when I say that the real thing is a much more useful studying tool."

"The real thing," Chuuya echoes with a frown, not really following that line of thought.

"You know," Dazai says, nudging his chin between them, "real-life porn."

"Real life – do you mean sex?" And then: "Wait, do you mean the handful of times I got you off?"

"No, when Hatsune Miku did it. Of course I mean you. Who else?"

Chuuya stares down at him, surprised. Then he quirks an eyebrow at him, mouth tugging into an amused grin. "You study my techniques when I suck you off?"

"What's it to you?" Dazai mutters, regarding him with a scowl that serves more as self-protection than anything else. "It's not forbidden."

"No, I mean –" Chuuya shrugs helplessly. "I'm just surprised you have the focus to do that when someone's getting you off. You've always seemed into it."

“I am into it.”

“But you think about something else.”

“I always think about something else,” Dazai counters flatly and gestures at his head, his index finger drawing circles in the air. “It’s just the way it works.”

“Except that you told me it doesn’t, like, five minutes ago,” Chuuya points out.

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“It just is.”

“Come on, humor me.”

Dazai returns his challenging look with a stubborn frown. He can probably tell that Chuuya has already figured the answer out on his own, yet he ends up indulging him anyway. “Because,” he says. “Giving requires focusing on the task at hand. Receiving does not.”

While he has a point, he isn’t entirely right either.

In the best-case scenario, he should be able to focus on getting off, too. Not so much to stop himself from overthinking but simply because sex is much more fun when you’re into it, body *and* mind.

Chuuya made the mistake of assuming that Dazai’s heightened response to every touch, no matter how light, meant that these two things were operating on the same wavelength. Maybe they did at some point, but now that he thinks about it, Dazai’s reactions have been rather reserved – and if not, then at the very least performed – lately.

He won’t make that mistake a second time.

“What?” Dazai asks, skeptical when Chuuya grins down at him.

“Nothing,” he says innocently as he tries to tug Dazai to his feet. It takes a few attempts before Dazai pushes himself up, albeit with a scowl

“You’re a terrible liar, Chuuya. Do us both a –” A startled noise escapes his chest when Chuuya shoves the things on his desk aside,

including his very expensive laptop, so he can nudge Dazai to sit down in its stead “a f-favor and spare us the time, and what are you doing?”

Chuuya’s the one between Dazai’s legs now, bracketing him in with his arms as his mouth finds a sliver of bare flesh to nibble at between sweater and gauze. “Well, I was thinking,” his eye flutters up to Dazai, “and that means that I just have to find a way to stop your mind from working when you’re receiving.”

Dazai’s chuckle sounds awfully strained. “It’s not like an off-and-on switch or something. It doesn’t work like that!”

“Trust me, there *is* an off switch, and I *will* find it.”

“Heh, Chuuya. Please, I didn’t mean it like that –”

Chuuya’s so busy rediscovering every hyper-sensitive spot on Dazai’s tummy that he doesn’t really hear what Dazai’s blabbing about – not until Dazai’s sweater suddenly traps Chuuya’s face in-between Dazai and wool.

He squawks out a noise of protest before jerking back and tearing through the fabric with the help of gravity and rolling back on the chair to create space. Dazai’s wide eyes gawk at his torn sweater, then at his bare chest, then at Chuuya, who glares right back at him.

“What the hell?”

“You didn’t have to *destroy* it!”

“You were trying to suffocate me!”

“I was just trying to make you stop before you got too into the idea of finding my off button!”

“By suffocating me?!”

“No! I don’t know! The idea just popped into my head, so I did it!”

Chuuya’s glower twitches. Confused. Annoyed. Annoyed and confused.

“I didn’t – I wasn’t trying to suffocate you, Chuuya. I swear.” Hugging himself, Dazai makes a face. “I just needed a *second*.”

“A second? To do what?”

“To talk…”

Chuuya's body is still tense from the muscle memory of getting shot, but he also doesn't need two eyes to see the same tension reflected in Dazai's stiff posture. Gulping down a breath, he slowly rolls back closer to Dazai on the chair. "So we clearly still have some, uh, trust and communication issues to work through." Dazai makes space for him between highs thighs, but he doesn't stop covering his chest with his arms, eyes drifting everywhere but to Chuuya. "Osamu, what just happened?"

Dazai looks at the palm that Chuuya places on his knee and lets out a shuddering breath. "What happened is that I shouldn't ever trust the first impulse that comes to my mind. I didn't foresee that it would make you think that I'm… trying to hurt you."

"Okay." Chuuya can accept that. "But you do know that I would have stopped if you told me to, right?"

"Not everyone does." Dazai's legs shift like they want to lock except that Chuuya is there and it makes for an awkward, stiff little jolt before they still again. "At least, that's what I've heard, heh." For once, the casual nonchalance of his performance falters, failing to reflect the authenticity of the last-minute addition.

And Chuuya's stomach sinks in understanding.

He gives Dazai's knee a light squeeze before withdrawing his hand. "I will," he says. "Doesn't matter when. Tell me to stop, and I will."

He's not sure whether he should have paid more attention five minutes ago, see Dazai's nervous laugh for what it was instead of writing it off as him being a bit flustered. There is no clear answer here though, especially with someone like Dazai who won't realize that he drew a line in the sand until someone has already crossed it. But it's not an impossible task either. They can learn. They can try. They can make mistakes and then do better next time.

"Well, that's good to know, but anyways," Dazai doesn't waste any time changing the tone of the conversation, "what I was actually trying to say was that you probably shouldn't try to find any off buttons of mine for…" He smacks his lips together. "… a while."

"Can I ask why?"

Dazai's shoulders pull back. "It just doesn't seem appropriate. Or fair."

"Not following you.," Chuuya says.

Dazai gestures at him. And when that explains nothing, he lets out a sigh. “You’re injured.”

“And my fingers and my mouth work just fine,” Chuuya replies bluntly, still not any brighter.

“But I was the one who injured you.”

“So?”

“So it’s only right that you don’t put your body through even more for the very person who did this to you,” Dazai blurts.

“Dazai,” Chuuya says, the threads of his patience quickly coming loose, “giving you an orgasm is not going to kill me!”

“But it will require energy that you already lack anyway!”

“I feel *fine*.”

“You’d say that even with your head cut off! You’re not indestructible anymore!”

“Don’t do that,” Chuuya snaps. “Don’t start treating me differently now that you know about it. I’m not made out of glass, for fuck’s sake. You’re not going to break me.”

“Stop!”

The string of curses on Chuuya’s tongue rocks to a sudden halt. His mouth twitches, but –

“You said you’d listen,” Dazai says, daring him to break his word. “So listen. *Stop*.”

“That’s not fair,” Chuuya spits back at him.

“Life’s not fair, buttercup. Either you keep your promises or you don’t.” With that, Dazai hops off the desk and pushes past Chuuya on his way to pick up his ruined sweater. “Seriously, you’re such a brute. That was my favorite sweater! It cost thousands of yen!”

“That *I* paid,” Chuuya mutters, crossing his arms in irritated resignation as Dazai bends down. “And leave the nicknames to Yosano. She’s much better at them than you.”

Dazai brushes his childish complaint off with a flick of his fingers.

“Tomorrow still stands, yes?”

“Obviously.”

Because tomorrow, they will make Dostoevsky sing like a canary.

Chapter End Notes

Hey ho, thanks for reading! :')

Next up we have:
- a dinner
- a revelation
- and the truth

Chapter 25: Five Criminals, Five Murderers, Five Sinners

Chapter Notes

> Not sure if it needs a warning but just to be safe: there are mentions of human experimentation in this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Chuuya invites Yosano, and by extension Dostoevsky, over, he does not have to see their faces to tell that they are surprised. The two weeks between waking up after surgery and now, he has kept himself isolated: meetings were held only through video conferences, no trips to the headquarters, no visitors – well, except for Dazai, who has been staying over rather frequently, but he has always been the exception to every rule that Chuuya follows. Chuuya even hired a private nurse to keep watch over his recovery. Yosano had a lot to say about that, but his reasoning for it – that the lie that Chuuya's on a business trip out of the country rather than injured and *weakened* – had to be solid, which meant that she had her hands busy running the port mafia during his absence, alongside the other executives, and that left her with no time to make the trip home every day.

Inviting them over violates that rule but only a little. After all, it's Chuuya's last day of forced bed rest, his wound recovered enough to let him return to the office in person. He will still need periodic examinations on top of his *other* regular check-ups that have to do with corruption, but what's one more doctor visit, right? Chuuya's so used to being poked and prodded that he barely even notices anymore. He has more important things to worry about.

Yosano knows of this timeline, yet her voice still wavers when she agrees to come over. Though Chuuya may have had a valid reason on hand to keep her away up until now, she is far too brilliant to overlook the shift in their relationship since that day in the hospital. Chuuya has been keeping her at arm's length. That would make anyone suspicious, but he is sure it raised more than one alarm bell in her given the secrets she has kept from him about Dostoevsky. A sudden invitation only makes them ring louder.

Yet here she is: in his kitchen, dressed to the nines, and wearing an impeccable smile that shows no uncertainty nor hesitation. The only concern that she reveals with a sharp scowl is the one of her role as

Chuuya's personal physician.

"And you have been disinfecting the wound regularly?"

"Yes," he says, tugging his shirt down to cover the wound before Yosano is finished with her unnecessary examination. "I told you. My nurse has been doing a fantastic job."

"Forgive me for wanting to be sure of it," Yosano's arms fold over her chest, eyes narrowing into skeptical slits, "but it's my duty to keep you alive and healthy, and you haven't exactly allowed me to do that recently."

"I am alive and healthy, so stop bothering me, and let me sit down to enjoy my glass of wine before we get down to business."

Yosano follows him to the table where their friends are already sitting. Oda is here as well. Chuuya had his doubts about involving him but –

EARLIER THIS WEEK

"You have to invite Odasaku."

"Are you sure?" Chuuya leans back in his office chair with a skeptical frown. "I don't think he's on it, so I don't see a reason to involve him."

"That is exactly why you should involve him." When his scowl doesn't wane, Dazai sighs and places his hands on the desk that they share. "The three of them are involved, right? Sexually, romantically – whatever -ly, it doesn't matter, which means that he has an in with them. They listen to him because they care about what he has to say. But Odasaku also cares about you and me. You, because you're the one who hired him and introduced all of us in the first place. Me, because for some reason he likes me as a person. I might not understand it but I can see its usefulness. When Odasaku finds out about what Dostoevsky did to the radio –" He leans closer. "— and that not only did he keep me away from you, but he kept Yosano away from him, he won't like that. He'll be disappointed even and, trust me, Chuuya, there is nothing worse than knowing that Odasaku's disappointed in you. It's worse than a beating."

Chuuya crosses his arms as he contemplates that. After a moment, he tilts his head. "So you're saying we can guilt them into coming clean with Oda's help?"

“They’ll have to come clean either way,” Dazai replies with a wave of his hand. “But Odasaku will make sure that it will be real and not just a farce to keep us from asking any more questions.”

It might sound far-fetched but having been on the end of Oda’s disappointment, Chuuya can see the point that Dazai is trying to make. Right now, their group is split into two fractions, and Oda is the middle piece that connects them.

It could work.

“You’re evil,” he tells Dazai and then smirks. “I like that.”

But Dazai convinced him.

“Thank you for all coming,” Chuuya says, taking a seat and looking into the round. “I know it mustn’t have been easy to find the time, so I appreciate it.”

It stings saying that. It’s not all a lie, after all. Both Yosano and Dostoevsky have done a lot to keep Chuuya alive and safe despite every obstacle that was thrown his way. It’s the reason why he didn’t summon Dostoevsky and beat him bloody when he got suspicious – seeing the full picture, whether he wants to or not, is part of being the boss. If he acted on every whim and impulse, he wouldn’t be able to keep such a gigantic organization running.

But he also can’t look past their betrayal just because of his personal attachments.

Chuuya will not tolerate being lied to.

“If the boss calls, we’ll make time,” Dostoevsky says, tipping his glass of wine towards him in silent salute.

His false diligence grates on Chuuya’s nerves, but he plays it off with a dry smile that doesn’t linger. By his side, Dazai’s wide-eyed and empty grin stays on his face like a creepy doll mask though – something that Chuuya would tell him to knock off for the sake of subtlety if there was any need for it.

There isn’t.

That’s why it’s just the five of them, no secret port mafia unit that’s surrounding the building and waiting to attack, no grand plan to

ambush the mighty Russian demon on a quest for the truth.

Just dinner and a conversation between friends.

That's all they need.

"Since I'm returning to the headquarters tomorrow, I would like to discuss my plans for the port mafia going forward," Chuuya says after he takes a sip and sets his glass down. Then his gaze swivels to Dostoevsky and Yosano once more. "Specifically, when you two were planning to come clean about the radio." He shrugs. "It would be a huge help to know whether I'll be going forward without you two in the future. You know, that kind of thing."

Someone's chopsticks clatter to the table.

And then, silence.

Thick, sticky silence filling the room like syrup.

Yosano's fingers tighten around her glass of wine, but her face doesn't betray anything – not yet – not until her eyes dart to Dostoevsky, whose lips twitch into an amused smile.

It's Oda, though, who ultimately breaks the staring contest between the three of them with a puzzled, "They did what?"

"He'll see it coming," Dazai murmurs to himself and strokes his chin in thought as he stares at the blank sheet of paper in front of him like it holds all the answers to the mystery of the universe. Then his eyes flicker up to Chuuya, across from him behind the desk. "I was careful, but it's Dostoevsky. As much as I hate to admit it, rats are very intelligent creatures."

Animal analogies aside, Dazai is right.

Dostoevsky is clever. There's a reason why he is able to run a criminal empire on the other side of the continent while traveling back and forth.

"So we use that to our advantage," Chuuya suggests. A double-layered element of surprise so to speak.

But Dazai makes a face. "He'll see that coming too."

"You think?"

“I know, Chuuya. I know!” he groans, slapping his forehead against the desk. “He’ll know that we know that he knows that we know. Of course, he will! I wish we could just skin him alive and be done with it, but *no*, it has to be a 5d chess game.”

“You’re enjoying yourself though,” Chuuya points out, not bothering to hide his smirk. Dazai might complain and moan about it, but that doesn’t change the fact that he has been more eager to solve this puzzle than he has been about anything else – even matching his enthusiasm for punishing Chuuya before that little hobby escalated and exploded in his face. “You’re having fun coming up with ways to get ahead of Dostoevsky.”

Dazai sends him a displeased side-long glance. “Having fun is a big word for such a small man, Chuuya.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I *might* like the challenge of a good riddle,” he concedes, raising his index finger. “Might. But that has nothing to do with Dostoevsky.”

Dazai’s fresh position in the port mafia as an advisor is technically for optical purposes only, but. Maybe they should talk about that once they have the time and space for the “what are we going to do now?” conversation.

Chuuya won’t deny that the thought of Dazai in the mafia makes his blood run cold still, but what’s more dangerous: a content Dazai in a dangerous environment or a bored Dazai in a safe one? If you ask Chuuya, Dazai’s head is more hazardous than any place in the world.

But Chuuya will leave that choice to him. This time, he will. And if Dazai ends up applying for a permanent position in the port mafia? Well, Chuuya will have enough means to make damn sure that they will get to live out their “what now?” question for as long as possible.

Anything concerning Dazai and the future they might have is a rabbit hole that is easy to go down to and hard to come back from. Chuuya has to pinch himself to focus.

“Do you suggest taking safety precautions? So he won’t slip through our fingers?”

Dazai’s lips press together. “No, he won’t run. He won’t fight us either. He’ll play it down at first.” His face takes on the shape of someone anemic and amused: a hyperbolic but hilarious parody of Dostoevsky.

"*What's the harm in delaying their return when they're here now, safe and sound, Chuuya-sama? It's all good now. There's no need to dig around in the past. You can trust me ~ I'm so handsome and good in bed –*"

"Yeah, I doubt he'll go that route," Chuuya says.

"You would be surprised how far he would be willing to go, knowing what buttons of yours to press."

Chuuya's brows raise. "What's that supposed to mean."

"Oh, you know," Dazai hums and folds his arms together on the desk – a picture-perfect definition of *an innocent angel in disguise.* "Chuuya likes his… lovers pretty and pliant for him."

"That's a bit reductive, don't you think?" Chuuya cocks his head. "I like many different things and dynamics. Not just one."

"But you liked him like that," Dazai says, voice pointedly soft, "or did you not?"

Chuuya meets his challenging stare but doesn't reply. Denying that statement would be a lie, and he is not a liar. But confirming it would mean affirming Dazai's theory and that's not –

It's not the entire truth either.

"I liked what he offered me," Chuuya says in the end. "But what happened in the bedroom and what happens outside of it are two entirely different things. I don't think with my fucking dick, and Dostoevsky isn't dumb enough to take me for someone who does."

Dazai runs calculations on him for another moment or so before he drops it with a sigh and pulls his legs up so he can pillow his chin on them. "Anyways. After giving us the *you're over-dramatizing this* route for the sake of keeping up the pretense, he'll switch tactics and offer you his help to find the book instead." He pauses. "Because that is what he has been after all this time."

"Right." While Chuuya's never had direct confirmation of that theory before, it's no news either. He has watched enough superhero movies to know that the villain is always after the empty signifier of the plot. The question is: is Dostoevsky their stereotypical one-dimensional big bad that just wants to see the world aflame, or is there something more to his wish to get his hands on the book? "Suppose he does that – offer us his help. Why hasn't he found it himself when it's what he's

after?”

“My hypothesis sounds as follows: to find the book, he needs one of us – the ones who were on the farm. The obvious guess is Atsushi since he is the supposed guidepost according to the Americans. My guess is it’s someone else. Based on my observations, Dostoevsky hasn’t taken even an inkling of interest in the boy.”

“Might be an act,” Chuuya muses.

Dazai inclines his head. “Maybe. Maybe not. I’m leaning towards the latter. You might ask yourself: why not let us come home if he needs one of us, right? Right. Well, I’ve been wondering too and so far I’ve come up with two possible explanations. One: he used that time to figure out who he would need, and kept us ‘safe’ in the meanwhile. Two: he first wanted you to solidify your position as the boss before resuming his plans. What I have not yet figured out is whether he needs you as an ally or…” His eyes meet Chuuya’s. “… an enemy that he knows rather intimately to defeat later on.”

Chuuya's teeth clench inside his mouth, but denial and anger don’t trump the force of rationality that’s currently behind the wheel.

This time, it’s not their bedroom activities that Dazai is alluding to.

It’s Chuuya’s actual physical weakness. His fatal flaw. Corruption.

One whisper outside the inner circle -- that’s all it would take to knock down the tower of cards that Chuuya has been sitting on all this time. He would like to pretend that it will take more than that to crush him. There is more to him as the boss, as a fucking person than his health, his life span, and his ability to use *for the tainted sorrow*, but the pedestal he stands on is not only lonely, it's narrow as well. That's how the game is played. Power is easy to grab. The hardest part is holding on to it.

“And in the wake of the chaos that would follow, he could unleash whatever he’s got up his sleeve,” Chuuya mutters, massaging his forehead.

“Mn,” Dazai agrees. “That’s why we don’t want to anger him just yet, but we don’t want nor need his help with the book either.”

Chuuya lifts his gaze to him.

“We’ll barter for more.”

“As in?”

“As in the department for special abilities.”

Dostoevsky’s mouth twitches, then it twists into a smile, and Chuuya has to dig his fingers into the thigh that presses against him this time — Dazai’s thigh — to refrain from leaping over the table and pummeling the man.

It would be one thing to look amused by the spectacle that is about to unfold.

It’s another to look *proud.*

Like Chuuya’s his goddamn puppy and Dostoevsky the owner who has taught him his first trick.

“So that is why we are here. I was beginning to wonder whether the day would never come.”

“For fuck’s sake, Fyodor,” Yosano mutters, head hung low in shame and embarrassment as she rubs the point between her brows.

“No, for fuck’s sake, Yosano,” Chuuya snaps. “You and your boy toy are in this together.”

Her gaze darts to him, fierce with offense. “I only found out when our friends already returned. And –”

“And you never bothered to mention it – yeah, I’m *aware.* In fact, I seem to remember you telling me that Dostoevsky would have no reason to do something like that. Was that a lie, too, or was that before you found out and did nothing about it?”

A squeeze of his knee makes Chuuya lean back, remember that the main offender is Dostoevsky – even though Yosano’s betrayal is what hurts the most. He forces his attention back to the man in question. “Well?”

“Well,” Dostoevsky retorts slowly, “we are in one piece still, so I assume you are clever enough to not let one secret unravel your entire dynasty.”

“One secret,” Chuuya echoes, his eye twitching in irritation. “It might have been just one secret, but there were a thousand lies, which means I have no reason to trust you anymore. None.”

“Your friends all came back in the end. Does it really matter that it took them a few months longer to do th—”

His voice cuts off into a startled noise when Oda grabs the back of his neck and slams him into the table – as gently as possible, but still. It’s a head and a table. “We all know that it matters, Fyodor. Don’t treat us like imbeciles.” Then he shoots Yosano a tight-faced look. “I don’t get it. Why would you not tell us?”

Yosano’s knuckles have turned white around the countertop. It takes her a moment to finally say, “Because. Some things are better left unsaid.” Her gaze flickers to Chuuya. “If I believed that he meant any harm to you – any at all, you’d have been the first to know. I swear that to you, Chuuya. But the deed had already been done, and until I knew why he had done what he had, there was no point in telling you about it and threatening *everything* that we had worked so hard for –”

“That wasn’t your decision to make.”

“Yes, it was! Sometimes keeping you safe means keeping you in the dark about certain things until I know what we’re up against!”

“I don’t recall ever giving you that job!”

“I stitched you back together when you were barely a person anymore,” she exclaims, the word snagging in her throat. “Whose else job is it if not mine? His?” She gestures at Dostoevsky. “Or maybe his?” This time, she nods at Dazai, and she spits out the word like a curse. “Someone *has* to look out for you when your own goddamn boyfriend fires bullets into you!”

“At least I didn’t stab him in the back,” Dazai pipes up, only vaguely offended. “Chuuya knew who the bullet belonged to. You lied to him for months.”

That’s only partly true. Dazai did shoot him in the back but –

The point stands.

“Do you, of all people, really want to have a conversation about lying?” Yosano snaps, pinning Dazai with a cold glare. “How is this any different than hiding your heritage for months?”

“The difference is that it’s not even your own lie,” Dazai responds flatly. “You did all of this for a rat. Was it worth it?”

This – they – are not an inner circle but a goddamn spider web full of lies and betrayals and secrets, and yet all of it, every little act of unfaithfulness, has one thing in common: it was done in the name of love. Romantic, platonic, it doesn't matter. Dazai didn't tell Chuuya about who he was because he was scared that it would change things. Chuuya sent Dazai away without telling him so he would be safe while he dealt with Mori. Yosano kept Dostoevsky's secrets to let him deal with Dazai first before he heard about the next betrayal.

All of it –

Chuuya looks at Dostoevsky, wiping the blood that's trickling out of his nose with a displeased look in his eyes.

All of it except him, right? He is not foolish enough to believe that he did it out of the goodness of his heart or personal attachments to Chuuya. Not him. Not Dostoevsky.

His cool gaze flickers up to meet Chuuya's. "You wouldn't have survived Dazai's temper tantrums if he had come back earlier. He would have torn you apart, and there were barely any pieces left of you as it was."

Chuuya shakes his head, refusing to believe that. "That's not why you did it."

"Maybe. But it doesn't change the fact that it's the truth."

"That's not the truth that I'm looking for."

Dostoevsky breaks their eye contact to slide his gaze to the side – first at Oda, who stares right back at him, disappointed but also expressive, and then Yosano; her gaze is less open, only for him to decipher, but Chuuya can guess what it means when Dostoevsky returns his attention to him and crosses his arms daintily over his chest.

"Congratulations, you figured it out. I want the book."

"Yeah, we all figured that much," Chuuya mutters impatiently. "What the fuck do you want with it?"

"An answer."

"What question is a book full of blank pages supposed to answer you?"

“It’s the only thing that can give me something I’ve searched for my entire life.”

“And what’s that?”

Dostoevsky's finger taps against his arm before he opens his mouth. “My –”

“The special division for abilities,” Chuuya repeats after Dazai, a question and a statement packed into one.

Grinning, Dazai nods. “Let him take care of the entire thing. I promise you, he has the means to.”

If he does, that also implies he has the means to the entire time. He didn’t use them though, and Chuuya guesses it’s so he would stay needed, relevant, in the inner circle.

“What does he have on the special division?”

“Information that would expose them as the criminals they pretend not to be.”

Chuuya gestures at him to go on.

Bracing his arms on the table, he folds his hands under his chin. “I remembered something from my childhood. A detail that always felt odd to me back then but that I never connected to anything. Until recently.

“You know how he and I used to be playmates? Well, it never made sense to me why our parents let us two specifically play together. We weren’t the same age. An eleven-year-old and a six-year-old don’t really have that much in common even though they’re both children, and I *had* siblings who were his age, who were much more suited to grow up with him. I wasn’t the strongest or the most promising mafia heir. I was the runt of the litter, and Dostoevsky was groomed to take over his mother’s empire one day. So that made me think and search for reasons. Then I remembered the reason why our playdates stopped.” Dazai’s gaze casts heavenward. “Or, at least the conclusion I drew based on deduction.”

“Spit it out already, Sherlock.”

Dazai’s eyes light up with glee. “Dostoevsky got sick at some point. He

had to have surgery even. But when I saw him again afterwards, he was different. His mother acted like everything was right in the world, happier than I've ever seen that woman, but something in Dostoevsky changed that day, and not soon after, their visits stopped. Months later, I ran away."

Chuuya's eyes narrow as his neurons fire through his brain, puzzling the pieces of the picture in front of him together.

Why choose Dazai as Dostoevsky's playmate?

What did Dazai have that their parents needed?

What kind of sickness makes you even sicker after you remove it?

And, then, it clicks.

Chuuya's eyes widen. "Oh."

"Mh," Dazai confirms his guess, eyes glinting like embers. "Dostoevsky doesn't have an –"

"— ability."

And here it is the long-awaited truth.

A man with a power that rivals an emperor's, and all this time, Dostoevsky had no ability to call his.

It is as ironic as it is terrifying, but it is also something that Chuuya and Dazai figured out a week ago already. The last puzzle piece remains though. Is the answer to Dostoevsky's question the ability that was taken from him or the destruction of everyone's abilities around him?

"Is that it?" Chuuya asks, tipping his head to the side. "All the scheming, all the lies, all the betrayals, and it was all just for this? Your ability?"

Dostoevsky's expression flickers. Just for a heartbeat. Then he presses out a grim smile. "It was stolen from me, Chuuya. Carved out with scalpels and poison, and all that they left behind was empty space where an integral part of me used to be. Yes, it was *just* for this."

Chuuya hates to feel a twinge of sympathy for him after everything, but he knows what it's like for someone else to play with his soul, to

dig around inside him and mess with things that shouldn't be messed with.

There's a certain feeling of wrongness that never leaves you, that makes you feel dirty and stained no matter how hard you scrub at your skin. It's invasive and violating. It's nauseating –

He blinks himself awake.

"I'm not saying that what was done to you wasn't unfair. It was. But that does not give you the right to do the same to others. I will not let you tamper with the order of things."

"Is erasing *your* sickness not tampering with the order of things?" Dostoevsky retorts. "What makes you so different from the rest of us?"

"Nullifying corruption won't mess with anyone else's ability," Dazai chimes in. "That question is stupid."

Dostoevsky's gaze snaps to Dazai. "And taking back what was mine – a part of me – will?"

Dazai's stare is so flat that it almost makes Chuuya cringe. "We're supposed to believe that's all you want? Your ability and nothing else?"

"I could ask the same of you. Do you just want to save Chuuya or will your wish come with one, two, three extra requests?" To make his point, he shrugs. "Maybe your desire to obtain the book has been false all along. Maybe you're still angry that Chuuya sent you away like an untrained dog. Maybe –"

"Okay," Chuuya cuts in. "Enough with the maybes already."

"No one here is a saint," Dostoevsky hisses, and the rare display of genuine irritation is enough to make Chuuya listen. "This room is filled with *murderers* and *criminals.* Chuuya, you're a government experiment and a mafia boss. Shall we count the blood on your hands? No? Okay, then let's move on to your precious boyfriend: for how much longer do you want to pretend that you ran away from your father because you wanted a different life, Dazai? You ran away *because* you were perfect for the mafia. Because you were a natural at it, and you knew it. You still are, or you wouldn't have gone through all the trouble to end up right back where you left: in the tower, sharpening the knives of the boss. You *hate* everyone who dares to love you but you also refuse to let them go. You corrupt everything

that you touch. Everything about you is *poison;* you take and you take and you –"

"That's enough," Chuuya snaps.

"No, it's not. If the book is your cure, then Dazai is your sickness. Think about it. What made you use corruption in the first place, hm?"

"Dazai wasn't the one who experimented on me. Or on you," Chuuya growls. "Your anger is misdirected, and you're too fucking blind to see it."

"Maybe it wasn't Dazai, but it was his blood. And from what I've seen, both of these things are equally destructive."

Dazai blinks. Then he squints. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that the government would have never been able to figure out how to remove someone's ability if you hadn't given them your cursed blood to do it." His gaze slides back to Chuuya. "And you. How do you think did your makers plan to handle you once you were done?"

"What the fuck are you implying?"

"They knew about Dazai. They knew about me. And they would have used him to control your ability same as they used his blood to take away mine."

"His ability doesn't nullify corruption," Chuuya says. "You're not making any sense."

"Because they never got their hands on Dazai to finish what they started. Maybe that's another lie from Dazai. Maybe he ran away because he didn't want to wind up in the same place as the rest of us."

Chuuya's eyes flicker to Dazai, not because he takes Dostoevsky for his word, but because –

Well, because as much as he hates to admit it, there is some logic to it.

And Dazai's sickly pallor confirms it. "I ran away because I didn't want to kill anyone. Maybe because I was too good at it, maybe I was too bad – but that wasn't a lie." He looks at Chuuya. "I swear."

Chuuya sighs before he reaches out under the table to give his thigh a silent squeeze.

That makes Dazai turn back to Dostoevsky. “You might have been a nasty toy stealer back then, but whatever was done to you with the help of my blood happened without my knowledge and permission. My father wasn’t exactly known for asking for consent before taking things.”

Dostoevsky mirrors Dazai’s position from earlier and cocks his head before asking, “And I’m just supposed to believe that you had nothing to do with it?”

“He was a child, for fuck’s sake,” Chuuya mutters.

“He was a demon!”

“Get over it already!” Dazai exclaims. “For one second, I even pitied you, but now you’re just being annoying about it! Boo-hoo, someone stole your ability. How sad! How terrible! Now you must go around and make it everyone else’s problem! Some of us had to face actual difficulties in our past!”

Dostoevsky jumps to his feet, toppling over his chair in the process. “Say one more word and I will cut off that tongue of yours. I dare you.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Dazai shoots back with a provocative smile. “You would not leave this place in one piece.” And then: “Not without an ability to protect you.”

That is enough to make Dostoevsky move –

But Oda is faster, snagging him back by the collar of his shirt before he can leap forward.

“You’re embarrassing yourself,” Dazai calls after Dostoevsky as Oda drags him away. “Go cry about it! Maybe that will earn you some sympat-*ah*!”

Yosano stabs a knife into the table, right in between his index and middle finger. “Will you stop behaving like a five-year-old?” she hisses.

“I’m only fighting fire with fire.”

“No, you’re just being *mean.”*

“Oh, so calling me a demon and a sickness is the epitome of politeness

but telling him that he is over-dramatic – because he is – is mean?"

Before Yosano can snap back, and drag out the argument for another ten minutes, Chuuya slams his glass down on the table, hard enough to make everyone else's dishes shake. "Shut up. Both of you."

"Chuuya," Yosano scolds, gawking at him. "Don't use your ability for things like these!"

"I'll use more of it if you continue yapping at each other like two untamed dogs," he mutters and scrubs a hand across his face. "You're giving me a headache. This is a mess."

Dazai yawns and stretches before he drapes one arm around Chuuya's chair and grabs his glass with the other. "It is. But hey, now we know he's telling the truth at least."

Chuuya hums in reply. "Not sure if he'll be willing to do anything more for us though."

Across the other side of the table, there is a startled silence.

When Chuuya lifts his eyes, Yosano is staring at them, a mixture of stunned bewilderment on her face.

"What?" Dazai says after taking a loud slurp of his favorite wine. "I can be mean and clever. One does not include the other."

"You… provoked him on purpose?"

"More or less," Chuuya answers. "We had to push a little. How we did that… that happened organically."

"If he was still pursuing a deeper agenda than getting his ability back, he wouldn't have sabotaged himself by accusing me – my blood of being a curse." Dazai makes an amused noise in his throat. "It's kind of disappointing if I'm being honest. I expected a bigger performance from him."

"You have no doubts at all that *this* wasn't a performance?" Chuuya asks, tilting his head to look at Dazai.

He is right – Dostoevsky's outburst just now felt real. But it is Dostoevsky, after all, and if anyone could pull off such an act, it would be him – or Dazai.

"There is always a 0,01% chance that it was," Dazai admits, so close

to Chuuya that he can smell the strawberry wine note in his breath. "It's a lot of variables, though, and I don't see to what end he would bring up my involvement in…" He pauses. "… the Arahabaki experiment. It serves no purpose, so it had to be real."

Chuuya makes a non-committal sound, losing himself in the rich color of Dazai's eyes for a moment before –

"Chuuya."

Yosano.

Right.

He shakes his head. "Not now."

"I have to –"

"Not now," he repeats, louder. There will be time to talk to her and what this will mean – what this will change – later. But right now, he still has a deal to make with the devil. "I'll talk to Dostoevsky first."

"Can I come, too?" Dazai's eyes go all wide and sparkly as he bats them at Chuuya. "Please, please, please, I want to be there. I want to see him cry!"

Chuuya rolls his eyes but doesn't object either. "He won't cry," he mutters, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "He'll punch you before shedding any tears. Now I would like to see *that."*

"I thought you liked me…"

"Doesn't mean I don't want to see you get knocked down a peg or two."

"I offered Chuuya an opportunity to shoot me and he declined it."

"There are, like, ten steps between a blow and a bullet, you masochistic tragedy."

"I couldn't possibly be masochistic. I hate pain."

"Could have fooled me."

Their light-hearted banter trails off when they arrive in front of the room most commonly occupied by Yosano and Dostoevsky. Technically, it's just Yosano's since she never moved out again after

coming here while she was on the run from Dostoevsky, and Dostoevsky never officially moved in. He spends half his time traveling back and forth between Japan and Russia – and doing god knows else what – anyway, and on the days that he stays, he shares a bed with Yosano. So now here he is, too.

The door is half-opened, and inside Dostoevsky is standing in the middle of the room with his hands planted on his hips, like he has been waiting for them. Oda is behind him, leaning against the dresser by the wall, arms crossed, expression cast to the ground.

Chuuya knows that Dazai is close behind, can feel his presence nearby because of the electric charge in the air, but he still casts a glance over his shoulder and –

Yosano has chosen to stay behind in the hallway, mirroring Oda's position as she leans against the wall with her arms tightly folded over her chest.

And here they all are.

Five criminals, five murderers, five sinners.

Chuuya levels his stare back at Dostoevsky. "We work together one last time. Then you and I are done. Professionally and personally."

"You sure you want to quit the ties between us so quickly?"

"I have no reason to trust you anymore."

"I could take care of the special division for abilities for you."

Satisfaction is a slow, lazy heat inside his stomach, spreading through his veins like honey, but Chuuya doesn't let it reach his mouth. Not yet. "Are we worth that much to you, Fyodor?" he asks with a slight huff. "I thought you've been just after your ability the entire time."

"I didn't invest in you as the port mafia boss for nothing," is the answer. "And you know as well as I do, that you'd rather have my people as an ally rather than an enemy."

Chuuya clicks his tongue. "Take care of the special division, and we'll see. But personally, we're done. You'll not step foot into my apartment anymore after this. You'll only get inside the base with a formal invitation. You'll not be part of the inner circle. You'll just be an ally. That's it."

Dostoevsky's eyes flicker past Chuuya for just a moment before returning to him. He gives a nod, as bored as ever, but Chuuya thinks he sees an odd detachment in his gaze.

"Chuuya," Dazai suddenly murmurs in his ear, tugging at the sleeve of his shirt. "The book."

Chuuya bites back the urge to roll his eyes. "Now to the book. One wish: your ability. That's it, Dostoevsky. No stupid tricks, or additions. Got it?"

"Will someone monitor you while you make your wish?"

"I'll make sure no one wishes for the apocalypse," Oda volunteers in a voice that sounds more tired than anything.

That's probably for the best. Oda might have just as much blood on his hand as the rest, but out of the five of them, he is the only one who has washed himself clean of it. He stopped. He said that he was done and he meant it. He wouldn't use the book for anything, let alone for something atrocious.

"And then what?" Dostoevsky demands. "Sakunosuke gets to keep it as well? Feels convenient, being the bodyguard of your boy-toy and all."

"Fyodor," Oda says then. It's just one word, one name, but somehow it's enough to make Dostoevsky's nasty grin falter and wane – a little, at least.

Yeah.

"Says the boyfriend of said man," Chuuya points out with a scowl. "Not that it matters. We won't just let the book lie around – even not with someone as trustworthy as Oda. We'll take care of it differently."

"How?"

Chuuya glances at Dazai.

But Dazai scoffs loudly. "That's something we'll discuss after everyone's wish is granted. Seriously, Dostoevsky. Who do you take us for? Amateurs?"

Dostoevsky's eyes only narrow ever so slightly.

And one last question mark remains hovering in the room.

It’s just a matter of who –

“Fine, I’ll go first,” Dostoevsky announces with a melodramatic sigh. Yes, that. His gaze drifts to the window and beyond, looking at something that they can’t see. “I have heard of a place out there that is supposed to be the origin of the book.”

“You mean the ability user that created it?” Chuuya questions.

“No.” Dostoevsky turns to him and a slow smile spread across his face. “Of this whole universe.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys, really hoped you enjoyed this chapter! We are so close to the finish... it's kind of crazy. I've been working on this fic for so long, and now I only have some of the Epilogue left to write :")

Next chapter we have:
- a team-up
- a connection
- and two wishes

Chapter 26: Metamorphosis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two months after Dazai's first ride in the Port Mafia's chopper, he is still not a fan of being stuck in this death trap. The ground is too far away, his organs are flopping back and forth so hard that he fears they might spill out of his mouth soon, it's *hot* and loud, and he had to choose between either sitting next to Dostoevsky or across from him. He picked the latter, so he could at least look away and pretend the rat isn't up here with them.

The good thing is that he doesn't have to look away from Chuuya this time. In fact, he spends the entire flight studying each and every freckle on his face. He has counted twenty-seven when Chuuya's eye flickers to him and he barks out a, "What?" It's that armor of perfunctory annoyance he puts on to cover the fact that he is actually flustered.

It's funny, Dazai thinks, how someone so confident can still grow so shy under the microscope.

"You said you'd distract me. Since you are a lying liar who lied about that, I have to find other ways to occupy myself."

Chuuya's gaze softens, and Dazai's thighs follow suit when a hand squeezes his knee.

"Sorry," he says. "We're almost there. Just another half an hour or so."

"If that's your way of distracting me, then you're not very good at it." That earns him another squeeze, and Dazai has to stifle an involuntary gasp. Maybe Chuuya is not as bad at it as he claims – though he would be better if they didn't have an audience.

Considering the web of sexual history between the five people in this chopper, Dazai doubts that any of them would mind being the audience to a bit of exhibition. *He* minds though. He minds very much. Just a few days ago, Chuuya proclaimed that his personal relationship with Dostoevsky was over. Dazai will not let the rat have the last word by giving him a show before he gets kicked out of their lives – Chuuya and Dazai's, at least – for good.

No way.

But that also means that a stifled gasp is all that he can allow himself right now.

“What do you think we’ll find there?” Chuuya asks then.

Humming, Dazai leans into his space. “Well, not the book, that’s for sure.”

He feels the weight of someone’s eyes on the side of his face. Not Dostoevsky’s – he has been avoiding Dazai’s existence like the plague that he accuses him of being. Oda has been deep in thought for the entire flight. So it must be Yosano.

“The Guild wouldn’t have tried to raze Yokohama to the ground if the book had been in Tottori all this time,” Dazai adds.

“The Guild could have been wrong.”

Dazai just raises his brows. Chuuya rolls his eye.

“We might find something that will point us in the right direction though.”

They have to.

Just like every other piece of clothing, Chuuya wears his sickness well, but that does not mean that he doesn’t feel its weight. Dazai catches it in glimpses: a second longer to get up here, a stubborn headache that doesn’t let go of him until he passes out like a corpse there. Not even Chuuya’s resilience matches the force of corruption: a slow but sure death.

Dazai’s fingers tighten around, he looks down, Chuuya’s wrist.

He knows that he can find the book. Dazai can do anything if he puts his mind to it – except perhaps letting himself be loved *but* he is working on that. Puzzles, mysteries, equations. It’s the area where he excels at.

The only thing that might outrun him is time.

What if it takes him longer than a week, a month, or a year to figure it out?

What if corruption gets to the finish line first?

“We will definitely find something,” Dazai corrects himself, making his voice light and airy just like his grin. “If the rumors are right and this place brings things into existence, it has to be connected to the book.”

That is effectively what Dostoevsky told them that evening. Doing research on the book, he discovered several century-old sources that claim a specific spot in the Tottori Sand Dunes has been something of a local mystery for it’s the place where things don’t disappear but randomly *appear*.

In 1912 it was a letter in a language that has yet to be identified.

In 1937 it was a compass that defied the laws of physics.

In 1940 it was just a gigantic, oddly-shaped rock.

In 1958 it was a skeleton of a species first discovered that day.

In 1960 a church was built there by the people who believed that *the* Book was the holy scripture of some ability-giving god.

During the Great War, that building was torn down, and the entire area had been declared state property ever since – every piece of information about it sealed and redacted. Dazai had discovered as much while he had been doing his own research but it’s also the reason he dismissed it. If the state, and therefore the Special Division for Unusual Powers already knew of it, the book wasn’t there.

Then, two weeks ago, security personnel found a young man wandering around, lost, confused, and claiming to have no memories of who he was and how he wound up there. He’s been hospitalized due to a psychotic breakdown, but a political journalist got wind of it and published a blog article, theorizing that the man had accidentally stumbled upon a government biochemical laboratory. Apparently, the whole thing is a cover-up for shady state business.

So now, Dostoevsky thinks the place is connected to the book. Where would these things come from if not the book – a magical object that lets words blossom into reality?

Dazai has yet to make up his mind.

“Emphasis on rumored,” Chuuya mutters, kicking out his feet. “The pyramids of Giza are said to be alien-made, too, and you don’t see us going there to confirm that.”

“We can make that our next stop. In case this ends up being useless.”

Chuuya only huffs. It’s a dry, flat sound that makes Dazai’s lips purse in thought, mind racing for things to say to distract *Chuuya* this time. Maybe that is Chuuya’s intention too – to distract Dazai by letting him distract himself.

“Would you still like me if I was a worm?”

“Hah?”

“If I was long and slippery,” Dazai reiterates. “No arms, no legs, not even a butt. Just long and wiggling around in your hand. Would you still let me live in your apartment and wash my hair?”

“How would I wash your hair if you were a worm?”

“I don’t know. But would you?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Dazai cries, voice catching.

Chuuya’s startled expression is almost amusing enough to overshadow the sickening twist of his heart inside his chest. “Why the fuck would I let a worm live in my apartment? I’d squash you the moment I saw you.”

“Chuuya!”

“What? You asked.”

“That is so…” He just shakes his head, incapable of expressing his pain in the Japanese language. “I can’t believe you. You would just kill me? You would squash little Wormzai like a bug?”

“Don’t say that,” Chuuya replies, rubbing his face.

“Say what? That you’re a terrible human being? I don’t have to! You already proved that well enough by yourself!”

“Don’t say *Wormzai*.”

“Why not? It’s not like you care about Wormzai. So what’s it to you if I say it, huh? Wormzai, Wormzai, Wormzai –”

Chuuya suddenly tackles him, pinning Dazai’s face under his arms,

and telling him to shut up with a hiss! But Dazai will not be silenced. He won't let it happen. He –

"Say it again and I will kick you off the chopper," Chuuya warns.

Dazai glares up at him, eyes and mouth full of hair. "*Wormzai.*"

"You little – *fuck!*" Scowling, Chuuya's arm jerks away when Dazai bites him. Hard. "I thought you were supposed to be a worm, not a rabid dog!"

"Well, what do you expect? You said you'd kill me if I was one!"

"Okay, all right! I take it back! I wouldn't kill you, okay?"

Dazai puffs his bangs out of his face before narrowing his eyes. "Really?"

"I'd just –" Chuuya gestures vaguely at him. "— bring you outside on a sheet of paper, I don't know. Why does it matter? You don't hear me asking you if you'd still like me if I was a cockroach!"

"Well, *I* would," Dazai proclaims, jutting out his chin. "You'd be *my* little cockroach. I'd even keep the lights turned off for you."

"You need professional help," Chuuya mutters and flicks his finger at nothing in particular. "After we're done with this whole thing, I'm finding you a therapist."

"Just because I asked you something so many other people have wondered about? Maybe *you* should go to therapy for being such a ostracizing bigot."

"I'm not the one who started this topic."

"You're the one who would *reject* me for being a little different!"

Chuuya side-eyes him, and when he gets a good look at Dazai, he turns to him. "Wait, are you actually upset? For real?"

"No," Dazai snaps, shaking his head. "Why would I be? I'm fine. I'm just realizing that you're no better than the Samsa family!" He sniffs loudly. "My mistake, I guess!"

Chuuya blinks slowly at him. "The what now?"

"Nothing! God, you should really stop reading fairy erotica and pick

up a classic every once in a while!"

"I'd let you live in my plant," Oda suddenly says, his face so earnest that Dazai doesn't know whether to cry or to laugh, "and water you every day."

"Thank you, Odasaku," he says, pointedly not looking in the direction of the one next to him. "At least *someone* here appreciates me."

"I'd throw apples at you," Dostoevsky offers then, inspecting his fingernails.

"I wish you would all stop talking about such disgusting things," Yosano is the next to say.

Sighing, Chuuya leans his head against the wall. "I want to go home."

Dazai only has to blink three more times to hear their pilot announce their arrival. It is a testament to the mafia's power and influence that they managed to secure an entire day here alone. If you ask Dazai, that speaks for itself. There is no secret government facility here, nor the obvious birthplace of the book. To find something useful they will have to put their heads together and think. Hard.

The chopper lands and Dazai's lungs fill with the centering sensation of being on the ground.

"You okay?" Chuuya asks as their friends jump out one after the other.

"You mean because I had to spend the last few hours in the air or because my boyfriend wouldn't like me anymore if I was a worm?"

"The flying. Are you really still hung up about that?"

Dazai sighs. "No."

It makes no sense to get mad about hypotheticals, but he can't help but wonder if this difference is what caused their problems in the past – and will continue to do so in the future. The last time Chuuya saw Dazai shed a protective layer, he knocked him out and exiled him to the countryside for nine months.

What will happen if he wakes up one day and sees a giant bug lying next to him instead of Dazai?

What if Dazai isn't the person that he thinks he is? That he wants? That he… loves – if such a thing is even possible?

He opens his mouth to make his reply a little more cheerful and immediately regrets it when he gets a mouthful of sand.

Yuck!

A hand on his back pushes him forward and towards the house — a very quaint-looking house. Its faded stone is almost entirely covered by vibrant green moss; it has no windows, not even a second story yet it has a chimney.

In a desert where no foliage grows.

Dazai has a distinct sense of wrongness. This house doesn't belong here. It's as though someone simply cut it out from its rightful origin and stuck it here in the desert in Tottori. An anomaly.

As soon as they're inside, Dazai sticks out his tongue, trying to get the sand off it.

He practically rips the bottle that Chuuya offers him out of his hands before throwing it back and spitting it out again.

"Ew," Yosano says somewhere behind him. "At least wait a minute before sullying the house that you enter."

"The house was sullied the moment the rat walked in," Dazai retorts once he can speak without the taste of sand coating his tongue. Then the actual inside of the house catches his attention and he pauses. "This doesn't look like a church to me."

Rough plywood shelves hang on the walls, their surfaces covered in dust; there is a rickety wooden bench in the corner; but most prominent are the *books.* An entire universe of them, scattered all over this tiny house. On the shelves, on the floor, in bags, on every surface imaginable.

And it's bigger, way bigger than it appears from the outside.

"Yeah," Odasaku murmurs somewhere out of sight, "library seems like a better word for it."

"All I know is that there is a connection to the book here somewhere," Dostoevsky butts in because of course has to. He stops in front of one of the shelves to steal a book and glimpse inside it. "Library is better than the church because that means we can actually read and find something." He levels a look at them. "So get reading."

Chuuya's channeling the tired expression of a student that would rather play video games than write their paper; poking the inside of his cheek with his tongue as he considers the stack of books closest to him. "That's a lot of reading."

"Not that I agree with anything that the rat says but," Dazai sidles up to him until he can talk to Chuuya without the rest of their powered-up misfits gang overhearing them, "it is worth it when you think about the end goal that we're trying to achieve here."

Listlessly flipping through the first book, Chuuya grunts.

"A life without pain…"

"We don't even know if it will work like that."

"It's a book that makes everything that you write inside come true. It will work exactly like that."

"Yeah, well, there's a reason it has been sealed all this time. I'm sure it'll come with a price."

Dazai waves his concern away. "Chuuya's filthy rich ~ You'll be able to pay up."

That earns him a reproachful glare. "I'm also not fucking stupid enough to know that signing a contract without reading the fine print is a bad move."

Suddenly a book gets shoved against Dazai's chest – the same as Chuuya – and by none other than Dostoevsky.

"Get the hell away from me," Chuuya snaps, beating Dazai to the string of apple-sweet insults waiting on the tip of his tongue. That response alone is enough to solidify Chuuya's volatile stress levels, which is probably the reason why Dostoevsky only taps the books with the tip of his finger before sashaying away.

A peep around reveals a scene that would appear almost idyllic if it wasn't for their circumstances Odasaku sits in the corner, frowning at the contents of whatever he is reading, while Yosano has made herself comfortable next to him with a flask of coffee between her fingers. Dostoevsky joins them on the other side of the table.

Just three friends – lovers, or whatever label they use for that odd thing they've got going on – on a study date. Totally normal. It just so

happens that two of them work for organized crime syndicates, and the other one is a former assassin who is now the bodyguard of the son of an ex-mafia boss and the current boyfriend of the current mafia boss.

Yes, totally normal.

Sniffing, Dazai squeezes himself into the tight space between the wall and Chuuya, who is still grumpy but not grumpy enough to shoo Dazai away. After a quick stretch and a sigh, Dazai opens the first book that he spots and begins his task. Reading is something that he is good at, so this should be easy.

Five minutes in, he quickly realizes this book isn't going to tell him anything relevant. Perhaps he should have taken a look at the title first because it seems a logical conclusion that *Indispensable Treatise on History of Cults* doesn't have a connection to the book. Or, well, it could have – after all, the lore that they dug up mentioned several religious cults that centered around it, but this one is a more general overview… and it abruptly ends after a few chapters.

Frowning, Dazai tries to find a publisher or the author's name, or anything really but comes up empty.

Time to move on to the next one then!

Memorable Tracts of the Cave: Manors and Mansions.

Throughout the next three hours, Dazai examines and dismisses hundreds of titles. Some are written in languages that he doesn't speak (yet); some stained too badly to decipher; some completely irrelevant (*'The Spider King' - A fictional tale of an adventurer delving into the Underdark to slay a fearsome giant spider*); others make his treacherous heart twitch with interest, though he has to shove them aside to focus on the task at hand, and sometimes with hope even, like *Orthodox Teachings of the Humans (Human religion and pantheon),* and judging by the brooding presence next to him that intensifies with each passing minute, Chuuya isn't faring any better.

It feels like Chuuya's stuck an intersection, one direction wants him to find the book and end the physical misery, the other one too proud and too self-loathing to accept such a Deux-ex-Machina solution to his problem. It's why Dazai was all too happy to force him into doing it. Partly, at least. He also refuses to live a dreadful all alone when he found someone who makes this oxidizing fever dream a tiny bit more tolerable. He thinks he has earned the right to be selfish.

And so has Chuuya.

Maybe they all have.

Even the rat..

When Chuuya massages the tender spot between his brows for the tenth time in a row, Dazai forces him into something else: a break.

“You’re not going to get through them any faster like this,” he says, blocking Chuuya from opening the book again with his hand. “Headache? Need some water? Pain-killers? A banana?”

“It’s fine,” Chuuya mutters, stubborn as he is. “I’m peachy.”

“Good for you. Now do you want something to eat or not?”

Chuuya shoots him a scalding scowl before accepting his defeat with a sigh, slumping against the back of his chair. It’s so remarkably easy to forget how sick his body is. Infected not with a disease but with death in slow motion. Chuuya makes it so easy to overlook the sagging exhaustion pulling at his limbs and focus on his small bursts of energy instead, the cocky smiles, the eye-rolls, the work-out he insists on doing every morning and night as if he needs his abs to be any more defined. Dazai dislikes that even he sometimes gets tricked. But it is the ugly truth. It happens.

“It’s just a headache. Nothing to worry about.”

“Headaches are nasty,” Dazai says and lifts his hand – it hovers in the air for a hesitant moment before he gathers enough courage to place it on Chuuya’s shoulder and re-enact something resembling a massage. A softcore massage because he has no idea what he is doing. “We can look through the rest together. I can read them out loud, so you won’t have to strain your sight.”

Chuuya’s eye flutters closed. “We’ll lose time…”

“So we will lose time. One or two more hours don’t matter in the long run.” He pauses though. “Or do they?”

After a few beats, Chuuya blinks and turns to squint at him. “Hah? Are you asking me if I have more than a few hours left?”

A little numb from secret terror, Dazai stares back at him. “Do you?”

“Dazai, do I look like I’m going to fall dead today to you?!”

“I don’t know! That’s the thing,” Dazai complains. “You could be having a heart attack and still insist that everything’s just ‘peachy!’”

Chuuya’s sour face relaxes a little. “It’s not that bad, I promise. As I said, just a headache. I don’t even think it’s from my, y’know, condition.”

“It’s not?”

“No. It’s just…” Chuuya visibly chews on his words for several seconds; then he exhales briskly, nostrils flaring. “Reading’s still hard. Sometimes.”

Curious and confused, Dazai’s fingers automatically stop moving. Chuuya urges him to go on though with a wordless gesture, so he does. “Well, go on. What does that mean by ‘reading is hard’? Is it because of your eye?”

“What? No.” Chuuya snorts, looking away. “I only learned to read after I joined the mafia ‘s why.” When Dazai blinks in surprise, he hurries to add, “I can obviously read now, but it, y’know, ‘s hard sometimes. Especially when –” He motions at the books in front of them. “— it’s obscure, archaic shit like this.”

“Chuuya… you’re lying.”

“Hah? I’m not. Why would I lie about that?”

“You have an entire library at home!”

“So? I told you it’s a problem of the past and not the present. Learning it took a lot of training and exercise, and I liked it!” He nods firmly. “Challenging but satisfying, yes.”

It takes Dazai another minute to process that information. Then his mouth curves into a smirk. “So is that why Chuuya’s such a fan of smutty erotica? Because they’re easier to read?”

“Shut up,” Chuuya mutters, folding his arms over his chest like a petulant child. Dazai quite likes that look on him: young and stubborn and annoyed, acting his young age. He likes that Chuuya still can. That the Port Mafia hasn’t cut that out of him. Yet. “I never should have told you.”

“Aww, Chuuya, it’s not something to be ashamed of! The opposite, actually! You mastered literacy in such a short time! Not everyone can

do that, you know!"

"Whatever. My headache's gone now." Shifting in his seat, Chuuya runs a hand through his hair. "Back to work. I don't want to spend any more time here than necessary. The air tastes like ass."

"Huh, I thought it would taste different," Dazai mumbles under his breath.

Chuuya (thankfully) doesn't hear him as his attention snaps to the person that approaches their corner, armed with snacks and drinks.

"Fuel up," she says easily, practically shoving the bottle in Chuuya's face. "Or I'll make you."

Chuuya doesn't protest, but he doesn't express any gratitude or any other words, for that matter, either, wordlessly taking a handful of hearty sips to swallow his medication before studying his options of snacks with a wary glance. He picks the power bar and a beef sandwich.

Intrigued by tension in the air, Dazai watches Yosano hover despite not breaking the silence either.

The air between the two friends has been crisp and tense, to say the least; it probably doesn't help that they neither have the proper time to clear it nor the space to gather their thoughts. Dazai doubts that this is the end of their path together. A small, selfish part wishes it was – it will take time for Yosano to look at Dazai and see more than the brat that shot Chuuya, and Dazai has better things to do than spend his days convincing someone of something that isn't even true.

She *is* right. Dazai isn't good enough. Perhaps Dostoevsky has a point as well. Dazai has shed a lot of layers within the past year and a half, but he doesn't know whether he will ever be able to shed the feral, wounded animal that his father raised him into. It will forever be a part of him, and that means that it will come out to play sometimes, that it will lash out and do things that make Dazai want to crawl inside himself and never come out again. Chuuya and his ceasefire will not last forever. It never does.

But it doesn't mean that it is all there is to Dazai — even though he used to think that once upon a time. He let that belief isolate him from the rest of the world, so he could live out his days alone and in pitiful misery.

But it's not the entire truth. There *is* more to Dazai. Maybe not that much, but enough for Chuuya to still sit here and let Dazai touch him like the same fingers haven't hurt him not too long ago. And that has to be enough for Dazai too.

That is not something he wants to explain to Yosano. She is Chuuya's bestie, not Dazai's. It's unlikely that they will ever grow as close as they might have before everything fell apart so quickly.

So, yes, a part of him wishes he wouldn't have to tolerate her wordless disapproval every time her gaze slides his way, sue him, but the better part of him – the bigger one knows that Chuuya needs her. Not literally, obviously. Chuuya's larger than life. He doesn't need anybody. But he needs her, a friend, a trusted advisor, someone who isn't Dazai or Dostoevsky or Odasaku, to be happy, fulfilled, and all that.

Not too long ago Dazai would say that he isn't like Chuuya. That he would be happy to have a friend, a partner, and a lover all in one person and not any more than that.

But now, looking around, seeing Odasaku murmur something to himself with a small frown, Dazai knows better. Friends can be a good thing. Friends can be amazing even. If they are like Odasaku, that is.

Friends like Dostoevsky, on the other hand…

It was that lonely, silent literature student talking when he thought he didn't need more than that. For all the words that Dazai read and for all the ideas that swirled around in his head, he was so silent. Saying nothing. Not because he didn't have anything to say but because he would rather never try rather than do so and get ignored. Or worse, misunderstood.

Isolation was a painful but just price to pay for the absence of pain, rejection, and friction –of life.

And Dazai paid it for years and years so that when he finally got a taste of what it was like to love and be loved in return, he was too happy to get anything at all to think outside of that. Think of more.

"How you're doing?" Yosano asks after what seems like an eternity. "Found anything?"

"No," Chuuya flicks his fingers against the cover of the bound. "Unless *Honest Aspirations of the Physician: A Dangerous Mind* – a book about

fucking physics and mad scientists will give something away about a damn fairytale book." Sighing, he shakes his head. "How do we even know it's an actual thing? Did we ever stop to think about the possibility that it doesn't exist?"

"It exists," Dostoevsky says flatly without taking his gaze off the book he is reading.

"Some people call that wishful thinking and let me tell you it looks shit. On all of you."

"Uncertainty doesn't look too good on you either, Chuuya-kun."

Chuuya ignores him to glare at *Honest Aspirations of the Physician: A Dangerous Mind,* then at Dazai when he stares at the side of his face too long, and finally at Yosano. "I'm right, and you know it. You guys are just too stubborn to admit it."

"Ye of little faith," Dazai comments, rising to his feet. "My father was dead-sure it existed."

"Your father also killed an entire building complex because he was paranoid. Full offense, but his word means shit to me."

"That's because you only ever hear stories of his fall, never his peak. The old man had a sharp mind. Ne, Fyodor?"

The moment the words are out, both Dazai and Dostoevsky pause, confused by the sudden comradery. Dazai even more so than the rat. He has no idea why he just said that – why he bothered to include him in the conversation at all.

"That is correct." Even when he agrees with Dazai, he does it with an air of superiority. "He didn't reign over the Port Mafia for dozens of years just because he looked dashing in a suit. The man knew what he was doing. That means he was also right about the book."

"Yes, so basically everything I said already," Dazai summarizes and gestures at himself. "I mean, in a world with abilities and singularities, is a magic book that hard to believe in? I don't think so."

"There's a difference between abilities and a genie book. Abilities – even singularities have *limits."*

"The book has limits too. It doesn't make everything come true."

“Hah? Then how does it work, do tell? I thought that’s the whole freaking point.”

“It requires the conditions you set to have narrative consistency. You cannot just write ‘all of humanity dies out’ and poof, everyone disappears.”

“The fuck does that mean? And how do you know that?”

Wandering around this tiny, whimsical house, Dazai tunes out the voices arguing back and forth. Chuuya wasn’t lying when he proclaimed that the air tastes stale and miffy, with notes of dust and rotten fabric, but Dazai, for some reason, likes it. Not the taste in and of itself. But the entire atmosphere. It feels ancient and timeless, familiar yet alien, at the same time, and something is comforting about it. Something that envelops Dazai like a thick, warm blanket. Something sweet and bitter.

Why would the government guard this place like a hawk? So far all they have found are odd and forgotten books that don’t really seem to belong anywhere. Interesting? Very much so, though not really worth the money and effort that they must cost.

But the more fascinating question is who built this place? Who put all these books here? Were they here from the very beginning or did someone leave them here at some point in its history? And if Dostoevsky is right about the connection to the book, what could it possibly be?

If Dazai could – and he can’t – he would spend weeks, months, y*ears* here, inspecting every dusty corner, every word written, no matter what language and every spider cobweb for clues until he had the answers to all the questions of the universe.

He has a feeling that this is the one place where he could actually find them.

His feet pause in front of a door – not the one that they used to enter. The others inspected it thoroughly, so it likely doesn’t hide anything interesting, but rationality isn’t strong enough to overshadow the pull inside Dazai’s stomach, dragging him in like an invisible thread.

He savors that feeling, just for a second; then he grabs the doorknob and pulls it open.

But all that is out there is the desert. The nothing.

It's not exactly disappointment that beats in his chest. It isn't satisfaction either though. There is something – Dazai is so sure of it that he can practically feel it. His human eyes just can't see it. Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

But it's there; an invisible, magnetic force that's larger than life. Right in front of him.

"That's strange."

Blinking, Dazai closes the door again and glances at Odasaku. "What is?"

"I've been looking through these documents – old newspaper, files, pages," he nods at the pile by his side, "and there is this one page that I'm pretty sure belongs to a book."

"And that is weird because…?" Dazai peers at it over Oda's shoulder. Dostoevsky even breaks his intense concentration to follow the conversation as well.

"Because I know that book." Odasaku frowns so hard that it looks like he'll break his face if he continues like that. "Here." His fingertip hovers over the Kanji. "That's the name of one of the characters."

"It's not an uncommon name," Dostoevsky points out, playing the devil's advocate.

"The name might be common, but not the content. In this scene, he explains why he gave up on his job as an assassin to pursue a normal life instead." He shakes his head in awe. "I have been trying to fill out this scene for the last twelve years of my life."

Dazai's heart starts thundering with the echo of war drums; excitement, adrenaline, and sugar rush. Still, he has to push further. The picture in his head is getting clear, but it's still too vague to see what it depicts. "Why didn't you look it up on the web?"

"The web had no information regarding that book series. Nor any of the libraries and bookshops that I visited. There was nothing."

"Then how did you obtain it in the first place?"

"I found it in someone's house." Odasaku cringes. "I stole it."

Dazai squints, but before he can vocalize his jumping thoughts,

Dostoevsky does it for him: “So you found a random book series that as far as you know doesn’t even exist – at least, not anymore – and it had one missing page that you now finally found here?”

Scratching the side of his head, Odasaku says, “It gets stranger. I only found the first two volumes. For a year or so, that’s all I had of it. Until I met the author.”

Both Dazai and Dostoevsky automatically inch closer upon hearing that.

“I didn’t know it was the author at that time. It was just an older man that I saw now and then at the café that I visited. But one day, he struck up a conversation with me about the books. I told him that I didn’t have the final part and he told me that it was better that way since it wasn’t any good. Then the next time, I came to the café, the last and final part was lying on the table that I always sat at.”

“And here it is,” Dazai murmurs; a dry breath escapes him as his eyes slide over that flimsy page like he might unveil all its secrets with one look alone. “The final part. How big are the chances that you would find it here of all places?” Nothing else in here is anything that they know or ever heard of. As Dazai said, it's otherworldly.

“Non-existent,” Dostoevsky replies without hesitation and wordlessly gestures to Odasaku to give him the page. “Coincidences is only something that naïve people believe in.” Then he sniffs the page!

Dazai’s nose wrinkles before he focuses his stare on his friend. “Who was the author, Odasaku?”

“It took me a while to remember his name back then and add two and two together,” he says, looking like he is stuck in the past. “It was Natsume Soseki.”

“Natsume Soseki…”

Oda’s head turns to him. “Do you know him?”

“It tickles something in my brain,” Dazai mumbles, squinting. “But I can’t figure out what exactly.”

Natsume Soseki.

Natsume Soseki.

Natsume Soseki…

Perhaps someone from the mafia?

That must be it.

But the longer he racks his memories of the mafia for that day, the more he realizes that there is no connection there.

Dostoevsky freezes then. “I do.”

And at the same time, the pieces inside Dazai’s fragmented head click into place:

“He used to be Mori Ougai’s mentor!”

Silently, he relishes in the fact that he was faster but much bigger than that euphoria is the sinking realization that they might actually find something. They might find the book. It’s close. So close he can smell its glorious and blank pages – the scent of *creation.*

Odasaku’s eyes narrow. “An author *and* the mentor of the former mafia boss?”

“Pretty versatile that guy, huh?”

“Versatile,” Dostoevsky says, “or godly?”

So he thinks the same.

Natsume has something to do with the book. Or in other words, he created the book.

“Wait a minute, slow down,” Odasaku says, scratching the back of his neck. “I agree that it’s an odd coincidence, but godly? Do you honestly believe he has something to do with the book we’re after?”

“Think about it,” Dostoevsky retorts, placing both palms on his hands. “A lost page of a lost book of a series that officially does not exist written by a man who also happened to be the mentor of Mori Ougai? Does that sound reasonable to you?”

“It’s suspicious, but I frankly doubt that this is much to go on.” Odasaku strokes his jaw before his eyes slide back to Dostoevsky. “Assuming we do take it as our clue: what is the plan here?”

“We have a name and a person. That’s our next step.”

“No,” Dazai says. “I don’t think finding Natsume is possible nor necessary.” That earns him two questioning gazes; Dazai responds to them by jerking his chin towards the page. “I think this is our next step.”

Odasaku’s brows crinkle in crystal-clear confusion. “The page?”

“I don’t think that book of yours – the last installation, I mean – was ever supposed to be found or read for that matter.”

Dostoevsky’s ghostly face only mirrors Odasaku’s confusion before a light bulb goes off in his head and he jumps onto the train of Dazai’s thoughts. *“The page.* It’s possible that the page and the book are the seals of *the* book.”

As much as Dazai dislikes him, he is glad that he caught on so quickly; that means he isn’t being led astray by mere hope but that there is a high possibility that this might be *it*.

“Precisely,” Dazai agrees, and then he searches the room. “Chuuya? Chuuya!”

But Chuuya is not where Dazai last left him; rather, he is leaning against the wall with a wry look of disdain and a pair of crossed arms, probably having followed this entire conversation. Meeting Dazai’s wide eyes, he raises his brows. “You really think this is it?”

“It has to be.”

“It makes no sense whatsoever,” Odasaku butts in. “If the missing page is the key to the lock, then what we’ve been looking for…”

“… has been with us the entire time already,” Dostoevsky finishes. Then he dips his head to the side. “You do still have that book, correct?”

A nod.

“Aside from the strange fact that the man trusted Oda with something so precious, it is a perfect hiding place,” Yosano points out in a dry voice. “In plain sight.”

Who would ever suspect that an old novel with a missing page could harbor something so powerful?

Then again, people have always loved hiding their little secrets in

novels.

Odasaku lets out a sigh and rubs his forehead, weary. “It’s absurd.” A moment later, he rises to his feet. “Let’s go.”

He is met with a room of stunned silence and even more stunned stares.

“What are you waiting for?”

He is right.

“Are we really taking our chance on such a small breadcrumb?” Yosano voices everyone’s concern.

“If it means saving Chuuya,” Oda says, “then yes, we’re going to take it. And if we turn out to be wrong… we can always return and try again.”

That’s the thing that Dazai only recently understood. Nothing in life is ever as final as the ending of a book. For the longest time, that reminder made him shudder in ghastly horror. One day already felt like it had too many hours, an entire lifetime of them was suffocating. But there is another side to it.

Nothing in life is ever final.

Chances. Attempts. Opportunities.

You might fail today, but you can always try again tomorrow. And the day after that. And the day after that one too.

Failure was the loudest of all the things that terrified Dazai, echoing through his head in the voice of his father.

Failure means death.

Failure means you’re worth nothing.

Failure means punishment and punishment leads to pain.

And so, he spent the majority of his life running away from failing by not doing anything at all.

When the truth is that failure is fickle – it’s not a state, not a period, and not the ending of a book either. It’s a noun. A verb. An adjective. And the only one who can give actual meaning to it is the subject.

Their friends start to gather their belongings, exchanging hushed, murmured words between themselves. In the meantime, Dazai drifts closer to Chuuya, his expression as steady as a mountain.

“Are you ready to go?”

Chuuya’s eye drifts to him. “Yeah.” Then: “Are you?”

Sucking in a deep breath, Dazai turns, swaying a little on his feet as he takes in this strange unearthly place one more time. That phantom of a sensation still sits in his belly. Somewhere here, there is another story – one that Dazai hasn’t read yet, and maybe never will, passing it a few centimeters shy of an encounter, but it’s not the one he wants to read right now; Dazai’s place is somewhere else.

With someone else.

“I am,” he says, and his fingers find Chuuya’s, interlinking them, as he leads them out of the door.

“The moment of truth…”

“Wait,” Chuuya says despite having both the missing page and the book in front of him. “I shouldn’t be the one doing it.” His gaze lands on Odasaku with the weight of a boss. “You do it. If this works – then that means that man, Natsume, entrusted you to do this. Not me. Not anyone else. You.”

Oda only lets out a sigh. “Okay.”

The five of them are crowded around the kitchen table in a tight circle so that they have to rearrange when he switches places with Oda. Chuuya subconsciously leans against Dazai’s side but feels some of the electric tension in his spine melt away when Dazai wraps an arm around his waist and hugs him closer to his body, eventually resting his chin on Chuuya’s shoulder as well.

It's effective.

That way they won’t even have to move once they write down their conditions on the page. They will just know.

If it works, that is.

Chuuya is not sure it will.

Life rarely works so simply.

So with bated breath, he watches Oda take a seat at the table, grasp the edge of the missing page between his fingertips and connect it to the place in the novel where it was torn out.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Not even the air.

It's just a damn book, just a damn page, nothing more and nothing less than that.

But then –

A golden, shimmery glow envelops the novel like a halo of light, soft and quiet like powder before it dissolves into air, and leaves behind something entirely else.

Then the magic happens.

The book.

Chuuya stares at it for so long without blinking that his eye starts to burn –

"Wait a moment, does this mean the original novel is gone now?" Oda breaks the silence.

The sudden laugh that he startles Chuuya makes him blink, and he realizes, that it's real, not a fever dream, and not an illusion. This is real and it's happening.

"Seriously?" Dostoevsky mutters. "You've got a thing that's capable of razing down entire cities in front of you and you worry about that other novel?"

Odasaku shoots him a flat stare. "It's my favorite book."

"I'm sure you will get back it soon enough. Natsume found a way to hide it before." And with that, Dostoevsky reaches for the book –

But Dazai slaps his hand away before he can even touch it. "How about we let Odasaku do the writing as well? I'll sleep better at night knowing that you didn't touch it."

"You're not only paranoid but hypocritical," Dostoevsky tells him with a leery look though he doesn't fight Dazai about it either. "Out of everyone here, I'm hardly the worst one. Maybe the most disloyal one,

but that makes you a hypocrite too."

"Good for you," Dazai shoots back. "I'll be sure to think about that later. Odasaku's still going to be the only one to write into this book." Though a moment later, he nuzzles Chuuya's ear. "Unless…?"

Chuuya huffs out a snort. "Hell no. I never wanted to touch that thing in the first place." Which is why he looks at Oda. "You don't have to."

"I don't, but I don't mind either."

"Sure? It might come with some crazy side-effects like making you obsessed with power…"

"Babes, we still have no clue what you're talking about when you say things like these," Yosano breezily tells him.

"I do," Dazai mumbles against his neck, low enough that Chuuya is the only one who hears it.

"Like no one else here has thought about it. It was *sealed –"* His voice cuts off when Odasaku wordlessly grabs the pen and presses it to the page.

He pauses before actually writing anything down though and frowns at the four of them. "What exactly are we writing? How specific do we need to be?"

Dazai raises his warm mouth to answer. "Write down that my ability is able to nullify Chuuya's corruption."

Chuuya blinks; he has never even considered how they would phrase this condition before, but clearly, Dazai has.

Oda nods and begins writing.

Chuuya's pulse hammers so quickly that his knees grow a little weak. Dazai is there, right behind him to hold him up, but even he is not able to erase the sickening taste of bile in his mouth entirely.

Chuuya should be grateful for this. He knows. He should thank the heavens for having people in his life that go to such lengths for him –

But all he can think of right now is what happened the last time friends of his helped him.

The flags stole files about his background for him, and they all ended

up torn to pieces. It took the coroner eight hours to make them presentable for the funeral.

They all died.

Chuuya doesn't want someone else to die because of him; doesn't want to have the blood of these people on his hands again, and even less so, does he want to live without all of them.

Yet here Oda is, writing down sign after sign like it's nothing and Chuuya's life is somehow everything.

A shy kiss on Chuuya's cheek brings him out of the trance of his past; the warmth that gushes through his blood like honey is just a little louder than the echoes of the Flags' voices.

"Anything else?" Oda asks once he is done.

Dazai hums. "Add 'immediately' too?"

"I'm pretty sure that goes without saying," Dostoevsky remarks dryly.

"Be sure somewhere else," Dazai chirps back and gives Oda a determined nod. "Add it."

"You mentioned earlier that the conditions have to be narratively consistent," Oda says with his gaze on Dostoevsky. "Is this narratively consistent?"

"I'd say yes, but you will have to ask mister Know-it-all over there. I don't think he appreciates my input."

Dazai sniffs behind him. "It is narratively consistent. Me not being able to nullify it isn't." But he still stops to quietly ask Chuuya, "It is, right?"

"Hell, if I knew," he murmurs back with a shrug. "I think so. Oda, aren't you a writer? You should know about narratives more than any of us."

"Bold of you to assume I know anything," he says with a blank face. "I just write because my head would explode if I didn't."

Chuuya scrubs a hand over his forehead before shooting Yosano a look. "What do you say? Any thoughts? Wishes to be added to our magical grocery list?"

“Add a reason,” she tells Oda. “Corruption is the result of a lab and its scientists, right? So write down that the scientist…” She pauses to formulate her words. “… enhanced Chuuya and corruption to be able to be nullified by an ability like Dazai’s.”

“Good point,” Oda replies and goes to work, not fucking around this time either.

Normally, Chuuya would be a fan of his casual approach to life, but he can’t help but feel a little light-headed given the massive weight of their actions.

He swallows. “This is insane.”

“Insane is kidnapping a young child and implanting a singularity into him,” Dazai’s voice washes over the shell of Chuuya’s ear and makes him shiver. “*That’s* crazy. That’s playing god and messing with the natural order of the universe. You are just setting things right. It’s the least you deserve after everything they’ve done to you.”

“I’m not the first and not the last person to experience unfairness,” Chuuya says, nostrils flaring as he pushes the frigid air out of his lungs, “and the rest of the world doesn’t get a chance to rewrite their ending.” His eye falls closed. “My life is not worth more than others.”

“They would if they had the chance,” Dazai argues softly.

Chuuya tilts his head back to him. “You don’t. You’re not writing down anything, and you’ve suffered.”

Dazai gazes back at him, borderline amused by this contradiction. “I don’t want anything to change.”

“That’s *bull.”*

“It’s reality,” Dazai murmurs and lifts his fingers to cup Chuuya’s face and direct it back to the scene that’s unfolding in front of them: Dostoevsky’s bent down, quietly talking to Odasaku and Yosano as they, too, discuss how to best phrase Dostoevsky’s conditions to get back what has once been stolen from him without his consent. “Now watch the magic happen. Chuuya deserves some of that.”

And so, Chuuya does.

He watches it, and watches, and watches until the page is full and there is nothing left to say, nothing more to add, but only wait for it

to become reality.

“This is it,” Oda declares and shuts the book before looking at his friends. “Now what?”

Dazai nestles closer to him as if to make sure that their bodies are actually touching. “Do you feel anything?”

Just as Chuuya is about to open his mouth and tell him the truth – that everything’s exactly the same, his bones heavy and aching inside him like giant bruises – when he feels a sudden weight overcome him.

The world fades to black.

He wakes up to a world surrounded by *white* and with a head filled with clouds of cotton.

Heaven maybe? If that even exists.

Then consciousness begins to seep into his body, and Chuuya realizes it’s worse than heaven. It’s a hospital room.

It didn’t work.

Whatever otherworldly magic the book possesses, it does not possess the ability to erase corruption’s claws.

The realization catches his breath, fills his lungs with searing tension until it eventually drags him upright in bed, and he notices that Dazai’s by his side, slumped over the edge of the bed, asleep.

What the hell happened after he passed out?

Before he decides to shake Dazai awake and get his answer, the door swings open, and Yosano strides in. This scene is a dizzying reenactment of the last year of his life; starting with the night he used corruption without an escape plan and ending with the morning he woke up after Dazai fired a bullet through his stomach – or does it have an end? It doesn’t feel like it. It feels like he is stuck in an endless loop that refuses to break.

Except that when Yosano’s eyes lock on him, they are full of light. Her expression is more discrete as she cocks her brows and asks, “Well? How are you feeling?”

Confused, Chuuya stares back at her. “I was going to ask you that.”

“I can talk all day long, but ultimately, it’s not going to change anything,” she tells him with a huff and flips open a folder to frown at it before shooting him another look. “So? Speak.”

“I don’t know,” Chuuya grumbles, frowning to himself. “I feel tired. Light-headed. Like I’ve just come out of surgery.” To demonstrate, he tries to form a fist with his hand, but it’s like his muscles are still half-asleep. “Just tell me up-front. Did it or did it not work?”

He isn’t going to break just because it –

“We’re pretty sure it worked.”

Chuuya’s thoughts slam into an invisible wall, and he blinks up at her. “Hah?”

“The drowsiness you’re currently experiencing is common after surgery or –” She gestures at him. “— a coma.”

“Hold on a second. I was in a coma?”

“Technically, no, but you’ve been out for two and a half days, so it’s like a *mini coma –”*

Chuuya scrambles out of bed – he isn’t sure what it is that he is trying to do, just that he needs to get on his feet. The only reason he slows down is the fact that Yosano doesn’t stop him. Usually, she is the first to scold him for over-exerting himself, but now she just watches him, a bewildering mixture of pride and patience glimmering in her gaze.

“Like a mini coma,” Yosano continues as Chuuya waddles to an unknown destination. “It’s hard to medically explain something that’s caused by singularities and magic books, but I personally think your body just needed to catch up on rest after what it’s been through in the last dozen months. Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Before he reaches the mirror in the bathroom, Yosano calls his name one more time, and he pauses.

“Chuuya. Just so you know, the book didn’t revert… all the effects that corruption caused.”

He doesn’t have to ask her to elaborate on that. Not when he steps in front of the mirror and sees the same reflection that has been peering back at him for the last year. One eye is completely white. His skin is marred with corruption marks still.

“Dostoevsky says it’s because you guys weren’t specific enough,” he hears her explain. “But since we’re still in the possession of the book, we can give it another go. Hopefully without another mini coma, but –”

“It’s fine,” he cuts in, his voice steady.

Yosano pauses to lift her brows,

Don’t get him wrong, it’s not like he particularly loves the whole corruption look he has going on. It’s just that he doesn’t hate it either. He is not ashamed of it. It happened, and it left its marks, and everyone can see them, and it’s *fine*.

He already interfered with the natural order of things to stop the physical effects. He is not going to do it again just to look *prettier*.

Speaking of which.

“How sure are you that everything else worked?” He sends Yosano a skeptical frown. “I don’t feel any different. At least, I don’t think so.”

“Well, for one, it worked for Dostoevsky. There’s that.”

Chuuya huffs. “He has his ability back?”

“He sure does.”

“Do I want to know what it is?”

Yosano cringes. “I doubt it.”

“Out with it.”

Another inhale and exhale. “He’s able to manipulate other peoples’ pain.”

Chuuya blinks. Once, twice. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“I experienced it first hand, so nope.”

“He *hurt* you?”

“Not intentionally,” she says, waving his concern away. “He got it back the moment you passed out; it took him a few minutes to control it – you can imagine how chaotic it was. Dazai accused of doing it on purpose but he eventually got a handle on it, so.”

“He can manipulate other peoples’ pain,” Chuuya repeats, dumbfounded. Then he scrubs a hand across his face. “Why do I not feel good about this? At all?”

“It *was* his natural ability that he was born with, and we all know that he, and everyone else with or without an ability, has other ways to hurt people either way.”

Maybe, but that little fact doesn’t make his belly hurt any less. “I still don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to.”

That brings them to another topic that the two of them have been dancing around for days.

That makes Chuuya’s stomach churn too.

And that –

That makes him realize that he is otherwise feeling… fine.

Sure, the drowsiness still lingers, but it’s not all-consuming. More than that, there is this ball of energy somewhere inside him, expanding by the minute, slowly pushing him in all sorts of directions.

He won’t run a marathon like this, but he has a feeling that using *for the tainted sorrow* will not leave him drained and exhausted. The opposite, actually.

His eye flutters closed as he concentrates on that.

When he opens it again…

He is higher than he was before. In the air. High enough to touch the ceiling.

Yosano’s grinning up at him on the floor. “What was that about not feeling it?”

“I imagined it would feel different,” he admits once his feet touch the ground again. “Like worlds-apart-different, you know? But it just feels *normal*.”

“I think normal is good, Chuuya.”

Yeah, he thinks so too.

“So, now what?” Yosano utters the question on both their minds when she follows him back to the hospital room. Dazai is still sleeping idly. He must have spent a long time awake considering he didn't wake up from the commotion.

“Now we return to the order of things.” The Port Mafia. Chuuya’s absence hasn’t gone unnoticed. Whispers of inadequate leadership have been heard – some of them even linking him to Mori’s assassination despite the fact that Dostoevsky officially took the blame for that. Then there is life itself: Dazai, Yosano, their circle. Everything. Things are messy now, and they need to clean them up.

“And you,” he says, throwing her a look over his shoulder, “need to make a decision – and before you say anything: I don’t *want* to force you to pick one of us, me or Dostoevsky. I respect you too much. But as the boss, I can’t let you play both sides either. You can’t be inside his inner circle and mine at the same time. It won’t work like that.”

Yosano takes the news without flinching, almost like she already expected to hear this.

After a beat, she says, “I want to stay inside your inner circle.”

Chuuya’s brows furrow in surprise but he holds his tongue, awaiting the rest.

“I was by your side the entire time. I *built* this with you. I deserve to stay in the inner circle.” She crosses her arms, raising her chin. “Dostoevsky’s business isn’t what I’m interested in. I’m not going to meddle in that. But I won’t cut him out of my life either.”

“I never asked for that,” Chuuya tells her dryly.

“Good.”

“Okay… good. But if you *ever* conspire against me with him again –”

“I won’t.”

“You will not see the inside of the Port Mafia building or my home again. I’m not going to let him, or you or anyone fuck with my personal relationships.”

He can see the strain it takes on Yosano, having to bow her head and agree to rules that she isn’t particularly fond of, but she does it anyway. And that means a lot.

“I’ll see you back at work as soon as the sun rises,” Chuuya tells her. “We have much work to catch up on.”

After Yosano is gone, Chuuya climbs back on the bed. Something inside him begs to do anything other than rest *again* – he has done enough of that for a lifetime – but his heart – oh, his human little heart just wants to watch Dazai sleep.

And so he does.

Chapter End Notes

> We're almost at the finish line! The next chapter is technically the last one because chapter 28 is the Epilogue :")

Chapter 27: Deals with the Devil

Chapter Notes

Warnings at the end of the chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

„Hey, wake up. Dazai, wake up."

Dazai's eyes fly open and for a few moments, the two of them stare at each other.

Well, Chuuya does. Dazai's mind is probably trying to catch up with his body as he lies there, eyes wide open, and stares.

Chuuya gives his shoulder another shake – only stopping when Dazai's face twists into a grumpy grimace as he rolls to the side and nuzzles the sheets.

"You okay? Looked like hell of a dream."

"It was," Dazai's muffled voice replies. "Though it felt more like a nightmare."

"Yeah, figured I'd better wake you," Chuuya says, sauntering to the closet. "But you said you wanted to tag along today anyway." When his reply is a suspicious silence, he casts a glance over his shoulder. "Or have you changed your mind?"

"Nope, still coming," the Dazai-shaped heap on the bed tells him, followed by a sleepy yawn. "I just… have to…" The sound of a sack of rice hitting the floor comes from the bed.

Chuuya can't even turn around. If he takes another look at the sleep-deprived monster on his floor, he will get tired as well – and unlike Dazai, he can't afford to dally around. He is the boss. He has an organization to run.

Instead: clothes.

He has stuck to the mafia colors since his ascension – mafia-black and blood-red, but today he feels like adding something new to the mix. He's just not sure *what*.

“Can I take a nap on your couch later?” Dazai asks, suddenly close.

“No,” Chuuya says. “I have people coming in and out of the office all day.”

“So?”

“So I’d rather they not see you drooling all over yourself while they work their asses off.”

“We can place a book on my head and pretend I’m reading.”

“You can catch up on sleep and come later, you know. Or tomorrow. Or next week. There’s no rush.”

A doleful sigh washes over the back of his neck. “I should have known Chuuya would change his mind.”

He turns to Dazai with an unimpressed stare. “I haven’t. I just don’t see the point of you coming with me to the HQ to…” He gestures at him. “… nap on my couch.”

“What if I just want to spend some time with you? Is that so wrong?” Dazai grumbles on his way to the nightstand where he keeps the clothes that he comes with.

They don’t live together. Dazai has an apartment that he shares with Oda. Chuuya has this one. So they haven’t discussed such serious things as clothes, drawers and dates. They haven’t discussed anything, to be honest – not even what they want to call this relationship even though they both know the answer to that.

It's just been a busy few weeks between the book, and the special division for abilities, and the port mafia. Chuuya barely had the time to catch his breath, let alone sit down with Dazai and lay down ground rules.

But.

He will make time for it.

In fact –

“How about we go out to dinner tonight?” he suggests. “Together?”

Dazai shoots him a sidelong glance. “Like a… date?”

“Yes.”

“With me?”

Chuuya’s eye narrows. “Do you see anyone else here?”

“Chuuya wants to go on a date with me?” Dazai forces out a high-pitched laugh and almost stumbles over his own feet, wiggling into his pants. “Pffft. Why? Do you have a crush on me or something?”

I am an island, Chuuya chants to himself. *An island that cannot be touched. An island that –*

“That’s pretty embarrassing.”

“Can you just say yes like a normal person and be done with it?”

“And so aggressive, too! What if I don’t want to go out with such a brute, hm? Maybe I want my paramour to treat me better than that.”

“Maybe I’d like to date someone who doesn’t use me as target practice but I still got stuck with you,” Chuuya mutters back, buttoning up his black shirt with rough, aggressive movements. “Tough luck.”

“Chuuya…”

“…”

“Chuuya.”

“…”

“Chuuya!”

“What?”

“This is the first date I have ever been asked out on.”

Chuuya’s fingers slow down; a fond smile makes his lips twitch. “Yeah, I know.”

Even knowing Dazai’s history, it doesn’t really make sense to Chuuya. Sure, Dazai’s a little odd, his bandages making him stick out like a sore thumb among young people, but isn’t college to be a place for self-discovery and acceptance? So what if he treats the 1,000 yen gauze from the supermarket as a fashion trend? He rocks that shit.

“I don’t know how this whole ‘dating’ thing works. I’ve read books about it but –” A pause. “One thing I do know is that the real thing always ends up being different. I mean, where do you want to go? Do we not eat together all the time anyway? What makes that different from a date?”

“Osamu, there’s no official guidebook on how dating works. It’s just getting dressed up, spending time together, and doing something fun. What works best for you.” He shrugs. “There’s this amazing restaurant that recently opened in our territory. You’ll like it.”

“Does that mean it’s mafia-affiliated?”

Chuuya’s eye flickers to him before he nods.

Dazai, now dressed in a button-up and a brown sweater vest, doesn’t do much to hide his smile. “Everyone will know.”

Once word gets out to the port mafia, it won’t take long for the rest of the city to follow suit. Dazai’s right. It might be their first date, but it will also send a message.

“Yeah,” Chuuya says, “everyone will know.”

“Heh.” Hands not-so-innocently folded behind his back, Dazai makes his way over to Chuuya. He stops close enough to fill the air in his lungs with strawberry shampoo and vanilla skin. “Interesting location,” Dazai murmurs and reaches up to even out the collar of Chuuya’s shirt. “I think my answer is yes.”

“You think?”

Dazai meets his eye. “Yes.”

“Good,” Chuuya says, holding that mischievous gaze. “Then it’s a date.”

The point has been made, the conversation over, and Chuuya should have left the house five minutes ago but something keeps him rooted to the spot, an invisible thread binding his spine to Dazai’s, always pulling, pulling, pulling until –

Their lips meet, shyly at first – a timid hello, a welcome, an *I’ve missed you*. Then Chuuya’s hand gravitates to Dazai’s neck, fingers curving around his bare skin, thumb finding the spot where his pulse throbs like a clock, and the air thickens; the kiss becomes firmer.

Chuuya never thought he could love kissing someone like he loves kissing Dazai. The bone-rattling drum of his heart, the heat pouring through his veins, the lurching sensation that makes him feel like he is sinking through the floor. He has kissed plenty of other people before him. Some matched his rhythm, others didn't, some he knew beyond their body, others that he kissed just for the sake of it. Some were people he would have liked to love someday, and others that were his kiss only for the night. But none of them even begin to compare to the addicting taste of Dazai's mouth. A drug that catapults you to cloud nine, then drags you down to the seventh circle of hell – all in just one night.

And before Chuuya reaches the ground, he pulls away – much to Dazai's dislike judging by the low sound that comes from his throat.

"Come on," he says with a jerk of his head. "You're not corrupting me into running late."

Dazai scowls, unhappy, though he does let Chuuya push him out of the bedroom. "You're the boss. You can be as late as you want."

"That's exactly why I can't be late. People depend on me."

"*I* depend on you."

"And I'm right here."

That shuts Dazai up. Well, for five minutes at least. But it's enough for now.

They don't have time for homemade breakfast, but thanks to Chuuya's marvelously ambitious personal assistant Karma, two coffees, and boxes with food are already waiting for them at the base. They eat in Chuuya's office even though Chuuya spends most of that time catching up on all the things that have accumulated over the night and being poked by Dazai's chopsticks. Then the calls from his executives start rolling in, and Dazai takes it as his cue to drag himself to his own office – albeit complaining loudly about it on his way out.

After several hours of dealing with boring bureaucratic bullshit, Chuuya's secretary informs him that his latest guest has arrived: Dostoevsky.

Chuuya tells her to send him in and waits.

A minute later, Dostoevsky strolls inside, wearing the same shade of

smarmy smirk as he did before, eyes still that aggravating mixture of amusement and superiority, like he knows something that the rest of the world doesn't.

"Not dying looks good on you, Chuuya**."**

"Having your ability back doesn't look too bad on you either," he responds, bracing himself against his desk. "Although I'm going to pass on a live demonstration."

He needs a long vacation from pain, thank you very much.

"I'm good enough that you wouldn't even notice what's happening," Dostoevsky tells him, sitting down across from him and wriggling his index finger in tiny circles. "You'd just think it's your body, not an outside force."

Just how much more power did his ability give him?

Instead of voicing that question, Chuuya asks, "So, are you happy now? Satisfied? Was it everything you ever wanted?"

"It wasn't everything I ever wanted, but it was mine. You'd feel the same if someone stole *for the tainted sorrow."*

He's not wrong. Chuuya never lost his ability, but he had to restrain himself from using it for the better part of the last year. He knows damn well what's it like to have such an intrinsic part of you stripped away. It sucks.

That is not where Chuuya was leading the conservation though. "Good because we're not going to use the book anymore. We're sealing it away again."

"Oh, don't I know it?" If Dostoevsky has a problem with that, he doesn't show it. "Oda already told me that. Twice. How little you all think of me." He pauses then. "It wasn't all a lie, Chuuya. Not them. Not you."

That makes him scoff. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"It's going to take a lot more than that to believe you."

"Well, now you have all the time in the world, hm?" Dostoevsky swings one leg over the other and sighs like an overworked mother

whose children don't appreciate all her sacrifices.

"I do." Chuuya tips his head to the side. "You planning to make them hard on me?"

"That would be counter-productive, don't you think? Especially as my partners wouldn't let that happen anyway." Dostoevsky's relationship with Yosano and Oda only makes Chuuya sleep somewhat sounder. The man has deceived them once, he could do it again. But if it happens, Chuuya also knows that his friends will have his back this time. "No," Dostoevsky answers his own question. "In fact, I'll make them easier, starting with the Special Division for Abilities, as promised. They won't be a problem anymore."

"Do I want to know how?"

"I can tell you over a glass of wine sometime," Dostoevsky says with a wink, already rising to his feet.

Chuuya scoffs. "In your dreams."

"Platonically, of course. Clothes on. So your kitten at home won't get jealous."

"*Goodbye*, Dostoevsky."

Dostoevsky raises his hand in goodbye as he saunters away. Chuuya just shakes his head.

Does he trust him? No.

But is he still curious to see how all of this will play out? Yeah. Kind of.

Once he is alone, he lets his secretary summon Karma into his office. They have work to do.

"So here we are," Dazai mumbles under his breath as he takes a curious look around. Although tonight is both a date and a symbol to the underworld, Chuuya still made sure they had privacy, their table separated by a thin silk curtain from the rest of the restaurant, the lights above dim and intimate, the flicker of the candles between them making Dazai's eyes glimmer like burning embers.

"Here we are." Chuuya is content to watch Dazai orient himself rather than study the menu. He is not here for the food anyway. "See

anything you like?" he asks when Dazai scans his option, a squint appearing on his face.

"Hm… I would like to have a cocktail."

"Which one?"

"All of them."

At Chuuya's raised brows, Dazai shoots him an innocent smile. "You don't mind, do you? It's not like money is an issue for you."

Wordlessly, Chuuya waves their waitress over who has been polishing glasses behind the bar – reserved just for them too. She totters over and bows her head before both of them until Chuuya acknowledges the gesture with a nod and a flick of his fingers.

"This entire section," he tells her, gesturing at the cocktail options. "Keep 'em coming one by one."

"Of course, sir."

"Keep them coming one by one?" Dazai repeats with an expression that's more amused than it is mocking.

"Hah? You just asked for that."

"Yeah, but there's no reason to make it sound so bossy."

"I am the boss."

"And what does that make me?"

Chuuya's eye narrows. "Little early for the big relationship talk, don't you think? We haven't even ordered yet."

"Or, a little late," Dazai says with a sniff, jutting out his chin. "Fourteen months, one week, and nine days late to be precise."

"You've been keeping count?" Chuuya huffs as he tries to do the math in his head to figure out what sort of anniversary Dazai is referring to. The first time they acknowledged their feelings? The first time they met?

"No. I counted back just now."

Ignoring Dazai's terrifying ability to do that, Chuuya asks, "Count

back to what exactly?”

“Why, the day we met, of course, you silly little man.”

“Really?” Chuuya says, brows high on his forehead. “You’re trying to tell me it was love at first sight or whatever people out there call that?”

Dazai gives him a dutiful nod. “From the moment I set eyes on you, I knew I would be ruined.”

Chuuya scoffs. “Fuck off.”

“Believe what you want, but there is a reason I came back. Don’t you think?”

Chuuya’s still peering at him to search for the truth when the waitress returns, carrying a bottle of red wine and a colorful cocktail on a tray. Watching Dazai slurp his drink, loudly, and with enthusiasm lets a warmth spread through Chuuya’s chest that has nothing to do with the wine running down his throat. Though that is good too. The best in the entire region. Just not on Dazai's level of intoxicating Chuuya, though.

“There are too many fancy-sounding options here,” Dazai complains, studying the menu with a pouty mouth and a scrunched nose. His eyes lift to Chuuya to glare at him for having the audacity to make him choose. “Can’t I simply order canned crab?”

"At least give something here a try."

“Ugh, if I have to... Chuuya is such an ignorant boyfriend dismissing my wishes like that.”

Twenty minutes later, Dazai eats those words. Literally.

After more whining, he finally let Chuuya help him pick a dish — crab kamameshi; and while he scrutinizes his plates with the intensity of a gourmet chef when it arrived, that wary frown transformed into a wide-eyed blink at the first taste of it.

“Oh my god. Did they put crack in this?”

Chuuya rolls his eye to make up for the fond smile that refuses to ease off his face. “No, you dumbass. That’s how good food tastes like when it doesn’t come from a fucking can.”

“Your cooking doesn’t taste that good,” Dazai tells him with a nonplussed shrug, ever-so-polite.

Chuuya warningly points his chopsticks at him. “Oi, watch it, brat.”

“Or what?” Dazai smiles at him mischievously. “Is Chuuya going to *punish* me?”

It never fails to fascinate Chuuya how determined Dazai is to make fun of Chuuya’s dominant streak yet simultaneously bait it out of him in every single conversation. Someday…

Someday he will get what he is asking for.

But today is not one of these days.

“Or I’m going to assign cooking duty to you,” Chuuya tells him and takes a few moments to savor the food falling apart in his mouth. Delicious. “You know, since Dostoevsky’s no longer up for it.”

Dazai’s expression grows sour so fast, it makes Chuuya choke a little. Just a little. He has to clear his throat against his hand though.

“I can’t believe you let a rat cook for you,” Dazai says, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “What is this, *Ratatouille?”* Then he pointedly shoves his plate, empty, towards Chuuya. “Another one.”

“Try something else,” Chuuya says.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Stop telling me what to do.”

“I’m just saying. You didn’t want to order in the first place and yet here you were, raving about it just a few minutes ago.”

At that, Dazai’s mouth presses into a thin, unhappy line before he crosses his arms and scrunches up his nose into the air. “Fine.”

“I’m going to *die.”*

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Chuuya says when the door falls shut behind them. “You’re not going to die.”

Granted, Dazai does *waddle* down the hallway without even taking his

boots off. Chuuya hears him collapse on the couch, and after shedding a few unnecessary layers of clothes, he finds Dazai lying on his side, patting his belly like a baby bump.

“If I had known that all it takes to make you eat is to take you to a nice restaurant, I’d have done it much sooner,” Chuuya remarks as he bends down to untie the plateaued boots around Dazai’s ankles. “Might have stopped me from letting you get a 7th serving.”

Dazai groans when the shoes slip off, toes wiggling before they disappear behind him. “It wasn’t the restaurant…. I just… I’ve never even crab so good before.”

“Osamu, crab always tastes that way in a good restaurant. "You're just too damn used to that processed, canned crap."

“Whatever,” Dazai mutters miserably and smothers his face on the couch. “I’m dying either way, and it’s *your* fault.”

“You know, light physical activity helps to speed up digestion. It’s much better than lying around.”

That earns him a reproachful glare full of daggered warnings. “Do not even remind me of that, you cruel little man.”

Chuuya blinks. “Huh?”

“Light physical activity,” Dazai spits. “I thought today would finally be the day I will get railed into oblivion, but no! You just had to feed me until I was fuller than a whale! This is not the kind of stuffed that I wanted to be!”

Chuuya's amused grin grows wider as understanding dawns. “I meant walking, Osamu. Not fucking.”

To be honest, the idea that they would have sex tonight never even crossed his mind. Primarily because heavy eating does not constitute the perfect first time afterward, but also because he figured they should discuss a few things first. Like the fact that Dazai hasn’t let Chuuya get him off ever since the gun incident. Or the fact that the last time they were intimate, he didn’t trust Chuuya to stop when he said stop. Or the fact that Chuuya would like to try out a few things to make that active mind of his tap out for a while. Ground rules. That kind of thing.

Somehow that only darkens Dazai’s withering glower tenfold. “I can’t

walk either. I'd have to *roll*. Like a bowling ball."

Chuuya only pats his arm before he turns in the opposite direction.

"Hey, where are you going?" Dazai exclaims like he hasn't spent the last ten minutes complaining about Chuuya. "You're not allowed to leave me like this! This is premeditated murder!"

"Calm down, I just remembered another remedy for a full stomach."

During Chuuya's first few months in the mafia, Chuuya encountered the same issue that Dazai is facing right now. Although he hadn't been starving on the streets, being the leader of a dozen other kids had meant *sharing*. Food, clothes, tiny luxuries like the manga volume that he had found in someone's trash or the parka that he had exchanged for a few coins. Everything. So Chuuya had had food, sure, but most of the time, he only had a few bites before someone else got hungry.

Then he joined the port mafia and the hierarchy of responsibilities turned upside down: suddenly people were making sure that *he* had enough on his plate instead of the other way around. Suddenly he had to go to restaurants for business dinners, and load up on protein to make his muscles grow, and fill the hole that the sheep had left in him somehow.

Not knowing the limits of his body resulted in a lot of aches and pains, and since Kouyou couldn't allow one of her proteges to crawl around on his hands and knees, she took matters into her own hands to teach Chuuya about responsible eating.

Chuuya comes back with a bottle of whiskey and a shot glass. Dazai eyes all of it very skeptically.

"What is your goal here, Chuuya? First, kill me by overeating, now inebriate me?"

"A bit of liquor does wonders with that." When Dazai sits there looking totally unconvinced, Chuuya thrusts the shot glass into his hand. "Trust me, it works. Try it."

Dazai does – not happy about it, but he does.

He waits for exactly one second before declaring, "Nope, absolutely useless. Why would you make me do that?"

"It's not magic," Chuuya snaps half-heartedly, whisking both the

bottle and the glass away with a flick of his hand. “Give it a fucking minute.”

“I don’t have a minute, Chuuya. I am dying.”

“I told you that walking –”

“I don’t want to walk!”

“Christ, what is it that you want then?”

“I don’t know! To feel better! For my boyfriend to hold me instead of yelling at me!”

And –

Oh.

“You’re so fucking annoying. Have I ever told you that?” Chuuya grumbles even though he’s already pulling Dazai’s legs over his lap. “I can’t read your mind, you know.”

Dazai sniffs loudly. “Why not? You’re supposed to have experience in these things.”

“This is my first relationship too.”

“So make use of – wait.” Dazai stops, head tipping to the side. “Really?”

Chuuya returns his puzzled frown with one of his own. “Yeah. Don’t you think you would have known by now if I had been in other serious relationships before you?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, it’s the truth.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“But – define serious.”

“You know,” Chuuya gestures vaguely between them. “Something long-term. Not just seeing someone because it’s convenient, but because you want to.” Because the thought of not being with them

feels like a death in slow-motion.

“So there were others,” is what Dazai of course gets out of that.

“None of them like you.”

Dazai slowly relaxes, resting his cheek against Chuuya’s shoulder. “Chuuya always accuses me of not talking enough about myself, but there’s still so much I don’t know about him either.”

“I think that’s part of the relationship experience,” he says with a huff. “It’s not a movie that you can just watch one time and be done with, but a really long TV show.”

“Hm,” Dazai’s fingers subconsciously tug at his sleeve, “so being in a relationship is basically like watching *One Piece?* Never having all the answers?”

“You could say that.”

“Heh. I’ve never liked movies that much anyway.” He yawns – right into Chuuya’s ear, but all Chuuya can do in response is smile. “Now that I’m not dying anymore, I’m just falling asleep.”

“Go ahead. It’s been a long day.”

“But then our date will be over,” Dazai murmurs. “I don’t want it to be over… not yet.”

“It’s just a date. One of many more to come,” Chuuya huffs.

“It’s the first date.” Dazai wraps his fingers around him, squeezing. “Our first one. And…”

“And?”

“And we haven’t even kissed yet.”

Chuuya tilts his head and waggles his brows. “You want a good night kiss?”

Dazai just stares at him, a little sleepy, a little grumpy. The dim lights of the living room make him look especially handsome.

“C’mere then,” Chuuya murmurs and cups his cheek when he receives no other answer.

Dazai continues to scowl right until the moment he doesn't, returning the light kiss that Chuuya gives him with an eagerness that outmatches his sluggish body. He sighs and shudders with each slide of lips, and goes taut with tension when Chuuya's tongue teases the seam of his tongue only to retreat. It's too damn easy to get swept up by heat and pleasure like this.

Dazai's mouth is reddened, his cheeks flushed, when Chuuya gets a look at him. How cute. Too cute because it's also fucking tempting, and they have both established that there will be no sex tonight.

Dazai tears his gaze away to drop his head on Chuuya's shoulder and mutter, "I can't believe you're not going to fuck me tonight. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me."

"I didn't know you wanted that." Chuuya has to clear his throat to get his voice to work properly. "Not just tonight, I mean, but you know."

Dazai lifts his gaze to frown at him with question marks in his eyes.

"Last time we talked about this, you said you didn't want me to," Chuuya reminds him pointedly.

"Well, last time you were still recovering from something I did to you."

"So it was just because of that? Not anything else?"

"Yes."

"So what, you felt guilty then, but not anymore?"

"I still do – a little – but my sexual frustration is bigger than my guilt."

"Ah."

"I really, really want you to fuck me, Chuuya," Dazai repeats, dragging the words over the arch of his neck. Then he pauses, lips hovering there. "You want that too, right?"

Chuuya hums out something indecipherable through his lips, pressed together. "Trust me, I do. I really, really want to."

He feels Dazai's chest sag against him. Is it just satisfaction or relief? Chuuya's not sure. It's hard to think when Dazai's hot breath washes over the sensitive skin of his neck with each in- and exhale.

“Why did you make us go to the restaurant? We could have just –” Dazai finger’s curl in his shirt. “— went to the movies or something.”

“You just said you didn’t like movies five minutes ago.”

“I’d watch them if that meant we could be having sex right now!”

“We can do that tomorrow,” Chuuya tries to bargain. “Besides, I wanted to talk to you about some stuff first anyway.”

“Stuff? What stuff?”

“Just stuff. Boundaries. Preferences. You know.”

“I really don’t,” Dazai says. “It sounds tedious. Can’t we skip it?”

“I’d prefer if we didn’t.”

Dazai lets out another frustrated noise before puffing out a breath and making himself comfortable. “Fine, whatever. Just know that it sounds so boring that it put me to sleep.”

That’s probably for the best anyway.

“Good night,” Chuuya tells him, brushing his lips over the top of his head. “Sweet dreams.”

Dazai squirms a little. “My dreams have been anything but… ahhh… sweet lately.”

“That sucks.”

“Tell me something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know… something I can dream about.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says, his head suddenly empty. After another minute he clears his throat and readjusts his arm around Dazai, hugging him a little tighter – a piss-poor attempt at covering up his silence.

For once, Dazai leans into him without giving him any shit for it. The fact that he is half asleep is probably to blame.

“Tell me…” Dazai gives his chest one, two, three soft pats. “Tell me about your pathetic radio –” Another yawn. “— calls… you radioed

me… right?"

Chuuya snorts out a soundless huff. "I did. I thought you were somewhere out there just ignoring me, so I kept on calling and calling."

"What did you… say?"

"All kinds of things. Mostly, I was asking you to come home. Other times, I was just telling you about my day." For a moment, Chuuya's back in the past: wrapped up in the cold arms of the Yokohama fall, leaning against the railing of his balcony, a half-burned cigarette in one hand, the radio in the other, the harsh wind carrying away his words but not the persistent pain that clung to every bone in his body. It's so vivid that he can still smell the smoke, still feel how cold it was. "Everything is so much easier when I get to tell you about it."

"Hmmh… you know… I wrote you letters."

Chuuya blinks. Then he looks down at Dazai. "What?"

"Letters," Dazai mumbles, closed eyelids fluttering a few times. "Lots of… letters…"

And just like that, he falls asleep.

Chuuya stares at him for a few moments before whispering his name. "Dazai?... Osamu?"

But nope. He actually dozed off.

And Chuuya gets to wonder about what he said for the rest of the night.

Not the rest of the night as it turns out.

One hour passes. One that Chuuya spends one-handedly responding to the E-Mails that pile up in the port mafia's inbox every time he blinks. His body starts to feel sore, and he is just about to start the difficult task of transporting Dazai to the bedroom without waking him up, when Dazai jerks out of sleep, wide-eyed and frazzled.

"Hey," Chuuya says, dropping his phone next to him. "Morning, sunshine."

"Where are we?" Rubbing his eyes, Dazai squints around the room. "*When* are we?"

“Living room. Yokohama, Japan. It’s shortly after midnight, I think.”

“Midnight…” Groaning quietly, Dazai pulls up his knees to his chest and buries his face there. “Chuuya, I feel even more awful now. That nap was horrible.”

“Aw, another bad dream?”

Without looking up, Dazai shakes his head. “Horrible. They’re so vivid.”

“Want to tell me about them?”

“No.”

Well.

“I’m never sleeping again,” Dazai decides as he scrambles off the couch, *“ever.* The same goes for eating!”

“I don’t think that’s the best solution.”

“Never!” Dazai repeats dramatically before he stomps off in the direction of their bedroom.

Bored and neglected, Chuuya follows him. What’s the point of having a boyfriend when you can’t annoy him, right? Inside their room, Dazai’s glaring at the lone piece of clothing that he has here: a thick, knitted sweater.

“You can borrow one of my shirts,” Chuuya offers.

“And walk around like a slut?” Dazai asks with a huff. “I bet you’d like that.”

As a matter of fact –

“I would, yeah.”

Dazai’s lips remain firmly shut, but he doesn’t need words to betray him when his ears, pink with heat, do that well enough on their own. He raises his chin high into the air, shoulders pulled back, before he accepts Chuuya’s suggestion and takes a look at the inside of his closet.

“You know, we could find a drawer for your clothes here,” Chuuya says after a moment of watching him study the closet unhappily. “Or a

dresser. Hell, the entire left side of the closet. I don't need that much space."

He absolutely does *but* he can find space elsewhere.

Dazai casts a challenging stare over his shoulder. "What if I want the right side, hm?"

"Don't push it, brat."

"I'm not a brat… *shut up, Chuuya*." It seems like the comment sparks Dazai's decisiveness as he hastily grabs the first plain shirt that he finds. For some reason, he doesn't change it into though. Instead, he walks back to the nightstand, opens the drawer, and takes something out – a notebook.

Questions buzz through Chuuya's head like a swarm of bees, but he keeps them locked inside, knowing that patience is a virtue when it comes to Dazai.

Dazai's knuckles are white from gripping the book, his gaze refusing to lift and meet Chuuya's curious stare.

"Dazai?"

"Here," Dazai blurts, practically punching Chuuya's chest with the notebook.

Blinking, Chuuya accepts this violent gift, eye slowly flickering to Dazai. "What is it?"

"Open it and see for yourself. Your one eye still works, right?"

Rude, but okay.

Dazai sighs loudly. "The letters are inside."

The letters…

"The ones I wrote during my exile."

"Oh," Chuuya says dumbly. For a moment, he's not sure what to do with it. Does he follow the pull of his curiosity and take a glimpse of what's inside? Does he thank Dazai? What is the procedure here?

At least, his uncertainty is reflected on Dazai's face, so he is not alone in this.

“I’ll take a shower,” Dazai says at the same time as Chuuya says, “Thank you.”

They both stop and look at each other.

“Shower?” Chuuya asks.

“Yes. I’m hoping it will clear this awful fog of my mind.”

“Okay. Just to be sure… you’re saying I can read these, right?”

Dazai rolls his eyes. “No, I gave them to you for safekeeping. What else –”

“I don’t know! I told you I want to be sure!”

Huffing, Dazai brushes past him and out of the bedroom. “Just read them! Or don’t! I don’t care! I don’t want to carry them around with me anymore, so they’re yours now.”

Then the bathroom door clicks shut, and Chuuya is left alone, only the silence of the night and the weight of Dazai’s words to accompany him.

He has a feeling that Dazai wasn’t merely referring to the letters when he said he didn’t want to carry them around anymore.

Despite his insistent curiosity, Chuuya’s steps are slow, first taking him to the living room, then, after another moment of consideration, to the kitchen to grab a bottle of wine and a glass first. *Then* he returns to the couch, making himself comfortable while a red glow keeps the bottle and the glass in the air.

Once he is settled down, he finally looks at the notebook in his lap – really looks at it. It has a golden binding with a holographic muster on it that changes design when you tilt it that way or the other. His fingers trail down to the seam before he snaps it open on a random page:

Dear Chuuya,

I accidentally saw Atsushi and Akutagawa make out behind the barns today, and now my whole day is ruined.

He snorts. The rest of the relatively short letter – mostly about how revolting Dazai finds displays of affection that don’t involve him – only makes his smile grow even wider.

Maybe it's not that bad. He imagined Dazai's words to be crueler and scarier. After their tireless efforts to mend their relationship, Chuuya thought that the letters might unravel all their grueling work, but maybe it's not that terrible. Maybe the letters are more like journal entries than hateful declarations. Like the radio calls.

He started in the middle of the notebook, so now he goes back to the beginning.

Dear Chuuya,

last night I was up, thinking about what sort of cold dessert I should serve you in exchange for what you did to me. Then I realize that you're already eating it. Every day. And hopefully, for the rest of your miserable life since I have decided to stop fighting my stay here and enjoy it instead. Actually, I'm planning to enjoy it so much that I will never leave again. So I hope you are comfortable sleeping in the bed that you made for yourself. I have a feeling you will have to do it alone.

See you never!

Yours,

Dazai

Chuuya's smile falters a little. Okay, so maybe he is looking at a bunch of hateful declarations here. He can do it though. He has suffered through worse things than these, so on he goes.

Dear Chuuya,

remember that letter when I told you that I hate you now? Now don't get me wrong. I still do…

By the time, the door in the hallway creaks open, Chuuya is a few dozen letters smarter and several glasses of wine tipsier. Footsteps creak across the floor, slowing down the closer they get, but eventually, Dazai appears in Chuuya's vision, hair damp and tousled, a pink leo print bathrobe around his body, and his face… cautiously curious.

"Hey," Chuuya says.

Dazai takes it as his invitation to eliminate the distance between them. His eyes briefly flicker over the closed notebook before they jump to Chuuya as he tugs Dazai closer with an arm around his waist.

“Thank you for letting me read them,” Chuuya murmurs, resting his head against Dazai’s stomach.

“It wasn’t a favor for you or anything. I just didn’t want to hold onto them anymore.”

“Obviously.”

They don’t speak for a few moments, and Chuuya is pretty content to just listen to whatever is going on inside Dazai’s tummy. Then Dazai shifts, his chest rising a little faster. “So what did you think?”

Ah.

“You mean about something in particular?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“It was interesting, reading what you had to say to me back then. A bit like getting closure.”

Dazai gives him a dutiful nod even though it’s clearly not what he was expecting to hear. Sighing, Chuuya pulls him even closer, down onto his lap so they’re on eye level. “When you wrote that you didn’t really feel like a… guy – do you still feel like that?”

Dazai’s body goes completely slack – not because he is relaxed but the opposite, probably tricking himself into performing because that’s just who he is. “I guess,” he says, suddenly very interested in the way Chuuya’s shirt buttons feel under the tips of his fingers. His gaze flickers up to Chuuya after a moment though. “Does it matter to you?”

“I mean, yeah,” Chuuya replies automatically, and before Dazai’s head can spin that answer into something that isn’t the truth, he adds, “It matters to me because it’s you, and I’d like to know if there is something that I can do to make you feel more like yourself –”

“God, you sound just like one of those leaflets for parents with gay kids.”

“Shut up,” Chuuya rolls his eye, but his grip around Dazai’s bony hips tightens, “what I’m trying to say is that you can talk to me, no matter what it’s about.”

Dazai looks at him for a moment, skeptically, before he decides, “Hm, no, I don’t really want to.”

“Osamu,” Chuuya says – pleads, pressing his head against Dazai’s collarbones. “Come on. I’m not some stranger or – or, I don’t know, Dostoevsky.” He lifts his gaze to Dazai. “It’s *me*. “

Chuuya. That name alone, stripped away from his position, the organization he belongs to, and the purpose he had in a laboratory once, might not mean a lot to most people out there, but it means something to Dazai. It has to. They have shown each other places that were never supposed to see the light of day. They have hurt, damaged, and broken one another, but they still picked up the pieces. They stayed.

That’s supposed to mean something, right?

Dazai’s adam’s apple bobs as he stares at Chuuya, a thousand different calculations running behind those dark brown eyes. “It’s harder *because* it is you. I could care less what a stranger thinks about me, but you…” He leaves the sentence unfinished.

“Osamu,” Chuuya says again, this time with a light snort. “I promise you, there’s nothing that you can say that will make me think differently of you. You fired a bullet into me; I drugged you and sent you away for almost a year.”

“Is that your way of making me feel better? Because you suck at it.”

“It’s my way of saying that you can trust me. I want to be someone you can trust.”

“And if I can’t?” Dazai peers at him from the side, eyes dark and endless. “Will you decide that it’s not enough again?”

Chuuya lets out a heavy sigh. It’s not an unreasonable question to ask given their history – sure, it stings, but he understands. “No,” he says though. “I want that, but you don’t have to. I’m fine with whatever you give me.”

The line between telling Dazai he no longer needs to keep his secrets to himself and pushing him too hard is a thin one to tread, and Chuuya has slipped up in the past, has crossed it without realizing it, punished Dazai for things that were not his to punish. But he would like to think that he is also someone who learns from his mistakes.

Dazai’s expression is too blank to know what’s going inside that head of his; whether he believes Chuuya or whether that will take time, too. The silence lasts for so long that Chuuya thinks this is it, and then –

“I don’t know how to explain it; it’s not that I feel like I’m stuck in the wrong body or anything like that,” Dazai blurts out, and his fingertips unconsciously drift over his thighs. “For all the things it did to me, I actually think it fits me. I simply don’t feel like I am what everyone else thinks of me.” His eyes find Chuuya staring at him. “Do you understand that?”

“I do.”

Dazai blinks at him, taken aback. “You do?”

Chuuya lets out a breath, winding one arm around the back of his neck. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m no expert but when I first started working for Kouyou, she gave me a few lessons to ‘prepare me’,” he air quotes. “She told me that we all performed certain roles, like in a movie I guess, that we assumed to be us, when, in fact, they were just that. Roles. Given to us at birth based on anatomy. And because we see everyone else around us perform them as well, we just assume that that’s the way it is, but they’re still roles in the end. A social construct.” He shakes his head. “Long story short, Kouyou’s point was that nothing was set in stone. Roles could be manipulated just like everything else. So I understand.” Frowning, he adds, “I think that’s what you meant anyway. Did you?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Dazai says slowly like he is trying to wrap his head around it. “That is exactly how I feel. Like I’m constantly performing a role that I never chose for myself.”

“Well,” Chuuya reaches out to give his hand a squeeze. “You don’t have to perform anything. You can just be.”

Dazai puffs out a huff. “I don’t even know what *being* means.”

“I think that’s the point. Sometimes there is no meaning to it. Sometimes it’s just taking one breath after the other and doing what feels right to you. That’s it.”

“Hm.” Dazai doesn’t sound too happy about that, but Chuuya doesn’t think that’s a bad thing. It is a heavy topic to talk about. Especially for someone like Dazai who carries these things around with him for years without ever uttering them to another soul, determined to suffer in silence like a wounded cat.

Chuuya clears his throat. “But do you want me to… refer to you differently? Like pronouns and shit?”

Dazai snorts before yawning loudly, stretching himself and sinking into the couch like an overgrown pudding. “I don’t know. I don’t feel like that’s something I need.”

Sensing a *but* coming, Chuuya waits him out.

It takes a few moments.

“But we could try it out,” Dazai says, shooting him a sheepish look and immediately jerking his gaze away again. “Or maybe not. It’s silly.”

“It’s not silly.”

“It feels silly.”

“Well, it isn’t. C’mon, give me something here. Don’t knock it ‘till you try it, right?”

“Ugh, fine! Just so Chuuya will stop being annoying about it.” Dazai dismisses him with a flippant flick of his hand. “Use whatever pronouns you want for me. I don’t care! I told you I don’t really feel like anything in particular. My gender is the void.”

Rolling his eye, Chuuya wraps his arms around Dazai’s neck, ignoring his pitiful flailing, to press his mouth to the top of his head. “More like your gender is *brat.* You’re so fucking annoying, it’s unbelievable. I can’t stand you.”

“You’re not particularly perfect either,” Dazai grouses, completely at odds with the way he practically melts under Chuuya after the initial tension bleeds out of him. “You snore very loudly.”

“You told me you like that.”

“You also believe everything I say for some reason. Do you know how annoying that is?”

“Means I trust you. How’s that bad?”

“Because I feel *forced* to be honest. You’re guilt-tripping me into becoming an open person!”

“Aw, poor baby,” Chuuya mocks. “Whatever did you do to deserve such horrible treatment?”

“You *bully* me. Constantly,” Dazai continues. “You… you are gassy!”

Chuuya pauses. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. Your snores are not the only thing keeping me awake at night. I’m just saying.”

“Well, stop saying it.” Scowling, Chuuya lowers his lips to bite Dazai’s neck for that. “That’s you just being petty.”

Perhaps punishing the brat with something that makes them shiver and sigh gives the wrong impression. Then again, Chuuya wasn’t ever mad, to begin with.

“And I’m pretty sure you have some weird kitten fetish,” Dazai mumbles once they find their breath again.

“Shut up,” Chuuya mutters against their shoulder.

“Make me.”

He traces the curve of Dazai’s cheekbone with his fingertips, liking that he doesn’t have to keep his one eye open to see him – to see Dazai for who he is. All he has to do is touch his skin, feel Dazai lean into the palm of his hand, notice the way his cheek gets rounder as he smiles — a small, intimate gift just for Chuuya.

He likes how scratchy Dazai’s voice sounds when he says his name. “Chuuya?”

“Yeah?”

“Kiss me.”

He likes that his heart feels set on fire when he leans forward without letting go of Dazai and does just that: he kisses Dazai.

And then he never stops.

One kiss turns into another; the slick slide of lips over lips turns into more: Dazai’s mouth parts around a ragged breath as Chuuya’s fingers follow the path of his face up to his hair, scraping his nails lightly down his scalp, and Chuuya can’t resist, he takes that, too. He wants all of it – the slow rub of Dazai’s tongue against his, the taste of wine mixed with minty toothpaste, the weight of the arms that loop around his neck and pull him down on the couch, on top of Dazai.

Chuuya shifts above him so the coarse fabric of his tight pants meets the thin cotton that covers his crotch where the bathrobe has ridden

up, then he thrusts his hips forward, slow and steady. Dazai gasps into his mouth and forgets to kiss him back for a few blissful seconds.

It's the best thing that Chuuya has ever heard – has ever created with this corrupted body of his. He wants to make Dazai shudder like that again and again. Until it's the first thing that comes to his mind whenever they see Chuuya's face. Until the good overwrites the bad.

He doesn't give Dazai the time to recover before surging into another kiss, deep and a little filthy, claiming their mouth and their focus like a possessive thief. His hand slips under the bathrobe at the same time. There is so much skin, so much sensation, so much of Dazai that Chuuya's mind spins with possibilities.

And Dazai spins right along with him.

"Chuuya," they rasp, fingers digging into his back like anchors. It's a question, a demand, a plea all at the same time – and Chuuya responds to all of them with the same answer: cupping Dazai's hipbone to hold them still as he drives his hips forward again, rubbing, rubbing, rubbing –

"Chuuya." If possible, Dazai sounds even more broken than a second ago. They shake their head against Chuuya, smearing that one word – his name – against his mouth like lipstick. "Chuuya, that's – I'll –"

"You'll what?" he asks nicely and lowers his mouth to Dazai's jaw to nip at the skin there, so soft and sensitive to each and every touch.

"I'll finish this before it even started," Dazai whines, "if you keep – ah, keep going like that!"

"So what?" Chuuya's not even trying to tease him or show off their difference in experiences. It's a genuine question. So what if Dazai comes like this, their bodies rutting together without even having taken off their clothes? "We have all night to spare."

Not only one night, but a hundred of them – a thousand of them, even.

They have time. Together. An entire lifetime of it.

"But –" Dazai's breath stutters against him, his head dropping against the couch. "But I don't want to do it like this…"

Chuuya looks up to shoot him a skeptical stare. "Really?" To highlight

his point, he presses their hips together and smirks when Dazai's erection pulses against him. "Could have fooled me."

"Stupid Chuuya… you know what I mean –"

"Why rush, huh?" Chuuya murmurs, trailing his mouth down the arch of his neck and his shoulder. "Or is there somewhere you need to be tonight?"

Dazai's restless energy hums under his skin, but he doesn't argue this time. Maybe because he is too focused on the slow suck that Chuuya gives the skin on his neck. Or because Chuuya's slowly dragging down his underwear with one hand. Or because –

"Your clothes are making me claustrophobic," Dazai tells him in a low murmur and fumbles with the button of Chuuya's pants. *"Off."*

It's a hassle to pull them all the way off when there are so many better things that he could do with his time – like kiss Dazai silly – and Chuuya curses when they get stuck around his ankles. But two attempts later, he manages to kick them somewhere out of the way and return to the treasure that's waiting for him with a hazy expression and pink, swollen lips.

Chuuya has to kiss him. It's not even a choice, at this point, but a physical need, a giant, living itch in the base of his stomach that needs to be scratched. The sweetness doesn't last for long, not when Dazai whimpers against his mouth like that.

"God fucking damn it," Chuuya hisses, blindly finding Dazai's cock between their bodies, and doing the same with his lips. "You're so fucking…"

Pretty and perfect.

Gasping, Dazai rocks up into him, chasing more friction as Chuuya's thumb swipes the droplets of precum around the tip of his cock. "Ah! That's so – that feels so good." One, two, three more thrusts later, and Chuuya hasn't even had the time to take off his boxer briefs before Dazai throbs between his fingers and comes.

Chuuya's breath catches at the sound of Dazai's little, breathless noises that fill the room, making him dizzy in the head, but he forces himself to speak. "God, fuck, look at you. So fucking pretty coming like that." He makes a tight fist around Dazai's cock, something to fuck into as she trembles her way through her first orgasm of the night. "There

you go, princess. Just like that."

Dazai twitches one last time – twitches hard – before all that pleasure sharpens into overstimulation, and her legs try to close around Chuuya.

Taking mercy, Chuuya lets go of her, sliding his hand up her stomach instead, gently massaging her.

"Chuuya's the worst," Dazai mumbles, eyelids fluttering across her cheeks.

"Shut up." A treacherous grin infiltrates Chuuya's voice, making it sound all tinny and shuddering. "I'm great."

But it's okay because he can hide that smile against Dazai's mouth when he presses his lips against it, light and soft, looking for comfort rather than heat.

Dazai snags his face on his way to pull back. Apparently, he has other plans. "Now you'll fuck me, right?"

Chuuya huffs, impressed by that boldness.

"Come on, Chuuya!" Dazai cries, hips wiggling impatience underneath him. "I don't know what else you want! I'm ready, I'm willing, I'm here – half-naked and asking you to fucking do it already!"

"Jesus, who said I wouldn't?" Chuuya mutters back even though his annoyance is a front. "I'm just not going to do fuck you on a damn couch. I didn't spend tens of thousands of yen on the best bed in the country not to make any use of it."

Dazai blinks. "Oh."

After another kiss, Chuuya sits up and wipes his hand off on Dazai's tummy, which earns him an undignified shriek.

"Ew, why would you do that?!"

"It's your shit," Chuuya says, getting to his feet. "Don't be a baby about it."

"But I just showered!"

"You'll have to shower again anyway. You'll get over it."

He's halfway through the living room when he notices a considerable lack of presence behind him. Raising his brows, he shoots Dazai a look over his shoulder. "Are you coming or what?"

"What? Me?" Even from a distance, there is a distinguishable flush on Dazai's cheek as he sits there, scratching the back of his neck like a deer caught in the headlights. "Yes, yes, just… go ahead."

Chuuya's eye narrows.

Dazai stares back at him.

After another minute of that, Chuuya gives up on trying to weasel an answer out of him and resumes his march to the bedroom. He does, however, shoot one last glance over his shoulder and he thinks he sees Dazai's eyes glued to his ass.

Interesting.

At least that gives him time. To wash his hands, freshen up, and shrug out of his shirt. He's studying the contents of his bedside drawer when the sound of footsteps alerts him to Dazai's grand arrival.

"What's this?"

After grabbing his favorite brand of lube and a pack of condoms, Chuuya follows the direction of Dazai's questioning gaze.

"Towel," he says. "Easier to clean up that way afterward."

"You make it sound like we're about to sacrifice a human together." Dazai's nose wrinkles as they take a seat on the edge of the bed, tossing one leg over the other and folding their hands together in their lap.

Chuuya tries and fails to stifle his fond smile.

"What's so funny, huh?"

"Nothing," he says, shaking his head. And then: "Can't I just enjoy this moment?"

"No," Dazai tells him stubbornly. "You absolutely cannot."

"Why not?"

"You're not allowed to have fun that doesn't involve me."

“But it does involve you.”

“I don’t want to be *the source* of your entertainment. I want to be a participant.”

“So have fun *with* me,” Chuuya says, and leans down to press his lips to the corner of Dazai’s mouth, still bruised and oh-so-sensitive. “Are you not enjoying yourself?”

Dazai’s exhale is strained and shallow. Chuuya cups their waist, and Dazai neglects to relax for a split second, all stiff tension. It’s so easy to forget that this is Dazai’s first time what with how vocal and demanding they have been, but it is, and they are *nervous.* At least, it feels that way. Maybe a part of it is excitement too.

The point is that Dazai isn’t snapping at him to be difficult – that’s just the way they deal with nerves.

Warmth spreads in Chuuya’s heart like powder, traveling through his blood to settle in every dark and cold corner, filling it with sunlight.

“I love you, “ he says, unable to contain all this affection spilling out of him like water anymore. “Have I ever told you that?”

Dazai’s lips part. Then they close again. He gulps loudly, eyes crinkling with surprised confusion – or maybe confused surprise. Maybe both. “Yes. No.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I do, and I’m saying it now. I love you.” Chuuya sighs. “You’re the most annoying person I have *ever* met, and half the time, I feel like throttling you with my bare hands, but.” His lips press into a fond smile. “I love you, and I can’t imagine my life without you, and –”

Dazai’s lips press against him all of a sudden, swallowing the rest of his speech with a choked breath. He grips Chuuya’s face so hard that Chuuya has to cup his wrists and rub his thumbs into them to soften his clutch.

When Dazai pulls away, it’s with a slick noise – and only for a fleeting moment. “It’s unbecoming of Chuuya to be so nice. Make it stop.”

Chuuya doesn’t have to. Dazai is already winding his arms around the back of his neck and pulling him into a kiss, then down, down, down, and Chuuya, as always, follows.

He ends up straddling Dazai as she is spread out beneath him, hair

tousled and poofy from air-drying, eyes half-lidded, cheeks pink and getting pinker each time Chuuya leans down to taste her mouth. The picture of innocence except that Dazai is anything *but*. That only makes Chuuya cup her chin harder, press his knee between her thighs firmer, and kiss her longer.

There is only the bathrobe and the underwear that Dazai, for some reason, pulled back on before coming to the bedroom. It doesn't take Chuuya long to peel both of them off until Dazai's naked, all bare skin, and bumps and ridges – perfect.

If he could, he would spend the rest of his life here – kissing Dazai until they are both dizzy and breathless, and the only worry on his mind is where to put his lips next.

That might not be realistic but spending the entire night like that is, and Chuuya intends to do exactly that.

At some point, Dazai hooks her legs around his back and catches Chuuya by surprise by rolling them over, so she is on top, looking down at him with a heaving chest. "How do you like this, huh?"

"A lot," Chuuya says, snaking one arm around the back of her neck with a smirk. "About time you put in some work too."

"Does Chuuya want that?" Dazai trails her fingers down the length of Chuuya's chest. His abs. Lower. Her brows raise to ask a wordless question.

"If you want to know whether I'd like you to fuck me: sure. Someday."

"And what if I wanted to fuck you now?"

"Do you?"

Chuuya rolls his eye at the telling silence he receives. "You and your damn hypotheticals," he mutters before lifting himself up to press a kiss to Dazai's neck. "You could and I'd enjoy it, but you would also get tired after five minutes, and I need a little more than that." Dazai's skin prickles with goosebumps; her eyes flutter closed.

"I could also ride you," he murmurs, letting his breath wash over every sensitive spot that he knows of. "Then I wouldn't be able to let you come until I have my fill though — and I'm not sure you're up for that marathon yet."

“So presumptuous…” Dazai mumbles around a silent moan. “Haven’t you paid attention to what I was saying in the… ah, letters? I trained with… with Odasaku.”

Dazai means their daily hikes. Chuuya knows that. His caveman brain, however, thinks about how they made out instead, and that makes his teeth somewhat eager to have a bite out of the brat on top of him.

Dazai *moans.*

Fucking hell.

“If you’re so sure about your stamina, then you can go ahead,” Chuuya whispers. “Fuck me, or ride me yourself. Let’s see how much improvement we’re talking about here.”

Dazai shudders under his lips, their laughter sheepish and nervous. “Let’s… do that another time.”

“Mhh, sure,” Chuuya agrees against their mouth because he is nice – and because Dazai’s kisses are sweeter when they are trying to distract him.

Chuuya lets them for a few minutes until the heat in his stomach grows impatient and he blindly searches for the lube. Making a sound in their throat, Dazai pulls away. “No, really,” they say. “Let’s not do that right now.”

“Relax, I won’t make you do anything that you don’t want,” Chuuya mutters as he pops the cap open. His eye raises to Dazai expectantly. “We do have to prep you at some point if you want to have sex tonight though.”

“Oh.” And then, Dazai nods enthusiastically: “I do. I really do.”

“Good.”

Once his fingers are slick and ready, Chuuya beckons Dazai closer with a nod. “C’mere.”

Dazai’s eyes are heady with anticipation as they let Chuuya pry his mouth open with his tongue, harder than before, a little filthy, before the slick hand around his cock makes them gasp even sweeter.

Chuuya has him moaning against his lips and twitching in his fist in no time whatsoever, cock nice and hard again. He would like to see

Dazai take his fingers like this, ride him and beg for more, but that's an idea for another day. Chuuya needs him completely loose and relaxed, and that's most easily accomplished when he has Dazai on his back, legs spread, and face in Chuuya's sight to check for any visible discomfort.

So he pushes Dazai down on the bed before lowering his mouth to his chest, leaving an imprint of his lips across the width of it. Dazai inhales sharply when Chuuya flicks his nipple with the tip of his tongue, then laps at it broadly, and –

Sucking it into the heat of his mouth elicits a full-body twitch. Chuuya has to focus on the growing pressure against his groin to stop himself from smiling too hard. It's just so satisfying. All of it. Dazai's so hyper-sensitive to every touch that a long round of foreplay without letting him finish will feel like he's being edged.

Chuuya's going to have the time of his life even if he has to wait to get his relief. That's all right. There's nothing better than a good build-up.

By the time, Chuuya's satisfied with his work around Dazai's nipple, flushed and pulsing against his tongue, the cock between his fingers is throbbing too. Enough that Chuuya has to squeeze, very lightly, just to prevent an accident.

Not that it makes Dazai any happier, who breathes out a shuddering sigh and pulls up his legs only to kick them out again. "Chuuya!"

"What?" he teases, just a little. "Do you want to come now or later?"

"Later, but –"

"Then no buts."

"But you don't have to take *that* long," he grumbles, hips squirming under Chuuya until a hand pins them back against the bed. "I'm so horny you could probably stick four of your fingers inside me and it would be all right!"

"That's… that's not how it works. It's about lube and stretching, not –"

"Then do that!"

Now Chuuya's the one making a sullen face. "But I want to take my time."

Dazai's head lifts to shoot him a withering glare. "What about what I want, huh? Have you ever thought about that*?"*

"Shut up," Chuuya mutters. "I know what I'm doing."

"And what you're doing is taking too –" His voice shatters around a shocked gasp when Chuuya's hand slides lower, giving his balls a light but pointed squeeze. Dazai's legs tense so hard that Chuuya has to let go, quick, so as to not let the pleasure climb to its peak yet.

Dazai's head falls back against the pillow with a whine that comes from the back of his throat. "Cruel…. Chuuya is so *cruel."*

He presses an apologetic kiss to Dazai's tummy and sheepishly murmurs, "sorry, baby." There is more flesh here now, more skin, more curves, making his mouth water.

Above him, Dazai sniffs loudly. "Be sorry in another way."

Well, Chuuya supposes he is low enough to start prepping him now. After making sure his fingers are still slick enough, he pushes Dazai's thighs apart with his dry hand, and slides lower with the other, tracing his rim with the tips of his fingers.

Even that is enough to make Dazai squirm in impatience, his hips trying to speed up the process. Amused, Chuuya lets him, and only takes mercy when Dazai starts whining, a low, guttural sound that goes straight to Chuuya's balls.

"Try to relax," he says before pushing one finger inside.

"We've already done this, remember?" Dazai mutters, voice a little strained, though his body accepts the intrusion easily.

Chuuya muffles his groan against the inside of Dazai's thigh at the heat that clutches around his finger. It's so fucking tight that he will probably lose his mind when he gets to fuck that, and Dazai will be the one who ends up laughing at his stamina – or lack thereof.

"I know, I know," he eventually rasps, slowly pulling the finger out to slide it inside again. "But it's been a hot minute since then."

"A long hot minute," Dazai agrees. "Do you even… realize how frustrating to return to nothing for an entire year after… after that?"

Chuuya takes their talkativeness as a good sign and pushes in a second

finger inside on the next thrust. Dazai's wells clench around him at first, then relax again. "Was it now?"

"It was! I got so… so bored of my own hand but I still had to do it because –" They hiss when Chuuya curves his fingers, checking to see how good their memory is – very good, apparently. "Because I was so horny!" Dazai whispers angrily. "All the time!"

"I'm so very sorry for that, baby."

"You *should* be."

When silence stretches between them, it gets a little harder to move inside Dazai.

Interesting, Chuuya thinks and decides to test the theory he just formulated.

"Did you ever try to finger yourself while you were away?"

Dazai's thighs stiffen around him but the tension lasts only for a moment, seeping out of him with his next breath, making his walls open up – enough for Chuuya to tease him with a third finger. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Yes."

With his curiosity piqued, Chuuya lifts his gaze to him. "Tell me more."

Dazai's eyes flutter, blinking, before he directs them skyward, shifting a little. "I had a bit of a logistical problem…"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning –" Three of Chuuya's fingers press inside, slow but steady. "— that Odasaku and *you* –" Dazai shoots him an accusing stare. "— didn't think about such things as lube when you packed my bag and shipped me off to no-man's land."

Oh.

Chuuya soothes his guilt by nuzzling the flushed tip of Dazai's cock and taking it into his mouth, giving him enough tight-lipped pressure to make the slide of his fingers easier.

He has to pull away though, knowing that Dazai's already strung out enough as it is anyway. "Oda didn't bring anything?" he asks then, frowning. He must have. According to Yosano and Dostoevsky, his quiet demeanor doesn't translate into the bedroom. The man fucks.

"Probably," Dazai half-hisses, half-gasps, hands fisting in the sheets. "But I didn't feel inclined to a-ask!"

Chuuya resists the temptation to comment on how Dazai felt differently about kissing Odasaku. Not the time nor the place to ask – not his right either. He channels that energy into stretching Dazai's walls and teasing his prostate enough to make the pleasure overshadow the tension without giving him too much. It's not as easy as it sounds – pleasure is a thin rope to thread, especially when it belongs to someone whose body you do not know that well yet.

It's strange to think of Dazai in these terms; in one way or another, Chuuya feels like he has known Dazai all his life, knows that he scrunches up his nose when he is annoyed, and that he likes his cereal best out of the box and that the one thing he can't stand more than pain is kindness. he knows how Dazai's fingers feel intertwined with his own, knows the thin scar between his thumb and his index fingers, knows exactly where to grip his waist to tug him onto his lap.

And yet there are even more – so many more treasures that are harbored inside and outside of Dazai's body, and Chuuya feels both wild with excitement and eager to discover all of them, one by one until he can draw a map of his soul and keep it tucked away inside his heart for the rest of his life.

At the moment, he is still at the starting line of this epic, life-long treasure hunt, and that's okay. Chuuya thinks it will be okay.

Because his fingers bring Dazai to the very edge and yet they do not push him over.

Dazai's desperation escalates to volatile levels, filling the room with his broken gasps and whimpers, and the intimate noise that their bodies produce every time Chuuya thrusts his digits into him.

"Almost there."

"Almost?" Dazai echoes, aghast. His bangs stick to his temple with sweat, and he's flushed from head to toe – a sight rivaling a billion yen painting. "What do you mean *almost*…?!"

“I mean that I want to be thorough, so –” Chuuya finishes by nestling a fourth finger inside. The thing about prepping is that there is a big difference between three and four fingers. While Chuuya is decently sized, Dazai probably doesn’t really need the stretch of four – but three of them don’t guarantee a proper preparation either. Chuuya would rather err on the safe side of things.

Once Dazai has more experience, they can explore their options and experiment with how much or how little prep he needs.

“Just breathe,” he says softly. “Focus on my voice and breathe.”

Dazai’s mouth curls like he wants to spit out something nasty and mean, but the added finger shuts him up. The next time his lips part, it’s around a silent moan as Chuuya crooks his fingers softly to avoid putting too much pressure on his prostate.

Fingers curling in the sheets, Dazai exhales a soft whimper. “Chuuya?”

“Mh?”

“I really need to come. Now.” His chin quivers when his eyes flutter open to glare miserably at Chuuya. “Now, or I’ll start – I’ll start crying and I’ll never stop again and we will both drown and –”

“All right, all right,” Chuuya cuts in and gives the bend of his knee a brief kiss, a mixture of apology and reassurance, before he pulls his fingers out. Whimpering, Dazai’s thighs close, then fall open again, and his hand – almost subconsciously – starts to drift closer to his neglected cock.

Chuuya slaps it away. “None of that.”

Dazai just blinks at him, hazy-eyed and confused.

Oh god.

If Chuuya was uncertain whether fucking Dazai for the first time would make him drop, then he is sure as hell now. He starts to drag down his underwear even faster, practically scrambling to kick them off.

The first touch of his neglected cock makes him hiss. It’s easy to forget about his own pleasure when he is focused on doing someone else, but usually, that need catches up pretty quickly once he starts fucking them.

“Osamu, sweetheart. You good?” he asks as he rolls on a condom.

Dazai’s head lolls to the side; he looks extremely and blissfully out of it as he just watches Chuuya shuffle closer on his knees. “Hm?”

“You,” a fond grin tugs at Chuuya’s lips when he settles between Dazai’s thighs and slides a pillow under his butt. “How are you doing, sweetheart?” He guides the left leg up, not quite around his shoulder but high enough to open him up for him, and the other to the side. “Doing all right?”

Dazai nods, so sweet and quiet all of a sudden. “Wonderful.”

“Yeah?” Chuuya nudges the head of his cock against Dazai’s entrance. “You relaxed for me?”

“Mmm,” Dazai hums, his tongue poking out to lick his bottom lip.

Chuuya’s mouth goes a little dry at the first push inside – so slow and steady that he’s not sure whether anything is happening or not until the tip pops past the tightest ring of muscle and Chuuya can feel, without a doubt, that something is very much happening. Dazai’s walls are accepting him, letting him slide inside inch by glorious inch.

“Shit,” Chuuya curses softly; his head spins with the crazy pressure that envelops his cock, and he has to lean his head against Dazai’s thigh for a moment to catch his breath. “You’re doing so good, Osamu. Taking me so swell, huh.”

Dazai’s lips are sealed – that silence takes some getting used to but there is something erotic about it as well, to have fucked Dazai into silence – with just his fingers. It’s only when he whines somewhere deep in his chest that Chuuya notices the way his hand is reaching for him, and he instantly links their fingers together, squeezing.

“I know you’re all doped out somewhere in that head of yours, but I’m going to move now, okay?” Chuuya gives him another squeeze and he doesn’t let go. “I’m going to take care of you. I’ll make it good for you.”

Eyes drooping and glassy with thick lust, Dazai opens her mouth – but nothing comes out. Chuuya relishes in the sight, and then he revels in the heat that laces his body, running down his stomach and urging his hips forward to catch the current.

He doesn’t bottom out, not entirely; it’s something he wishes to work

up to, so that he alone will be the only thing holding Dazai together only to break her into a thousand loose pieces. Instead, he pulls back until only the tip remains inside. Dazai's throat bobs, eyes going wide and glassy like virgin winter ice, her fingers digging into the skin on Chuuya's hand like she wants both of them to break tonight.

Chuuya just might.

Before that, he slides back in. The pressure all around him threatens to make his heart burst – maybe it already has, he feels slippery and wobbly all over like his insides are leaking out. Chuuya's eye involuntarily tears away from Dazai's pretty, but the sight of his cock disappearing in-between Dazai's cheeks only makes the room, the entire world, shrink even more – narrowing until there is nothing more but this.

This intoxicating, all-consuming fever.

Dazai's hand, clammy with sweat, tugs wordlessly at his arm, and Chuuya gulps down a dry breath, nodding. "Yeah, I know," he babbles. "I feel it too. I do."

It's not even that he is feeling it – rather that the feeling has taken possession of him. Chuuya's no longer the subject dictating the pace of this sentence, but it is commanding him, urging him back, forward, faster, a little harder, more, more –

"O-Oh," Dazai gasps when Chuuya's hips drive just right into him; that one little word so full of surprise and shock like he is seeing the color red for the first time, not its copy-cat shades, crimson, Burberry, wine, vermillion – no, pure fucking *red* in all its naked glory. "Oh! Chuuya – oh god –"

"Oh?" Chuuya mocks lovingly, breathlessly, and pins his hip to the bed one-handedly to nail that spot again and again and again, so Dazai will not only get a taste of red but the whole fucking rainbow.

Dazai begins to thrash under him, unconscious little movements, his free arm shifting back, legs trembling, hips squirming in place. "Chuuya," he slurs, turning into liquid. "Chuuya, oh god – please – I can't –"

"It's all right, baby," Chuuya murmurs, holding Dazai's hand with a gentleness that his hips don't possess as they fuck him hard and steady. "You can. You can come."

“No,” he hiccups. “No, I can’t – it’s too far –”

Chuuya softens his grip around Dazai’s hip to lift it up and meet his thrusts instead. “Like this, yeah? Just – lift your hips for me, lovely.”

Dazai’s too drunk on his desperation to resist, doing as he is told even if it’s with wobbly clumsiness and unfiltered fervor, grinding himself up and against Chuuya’s cock once, twice, and that’s his breaking point.

He stiffens all over, and the only sound he makes is a choked, high-pitched noise before his cock twitches against his stomach and spills, painting his soft belly with white ribbons of cum. He looks too adorable all spaced out likes this to deny him more. Chuuya maintains his pace with clenched teeth and wraps his hand around Dazai, massaging his slit with his thumb to milk out a little more until Dazai’s a trembling, shivering mess, clenching so tightly around him that it’s a small miracle Chuuya hasn’t followed him over the edge yet.

But the moment Dazai’s head hits the pillow, the thread of patience that Chuuya has been dragging out burns down to a crisp. His hand tightens around Dazai’s leg, trembling from exhaustion, and he chases that edge now in near distance like a man possessed.

Dazai’s startled gasp only tightens the coil inside him, a sensation rivaling the rush of adrenaline bolting down his spine when he throws himself off the top of a skyscraper face-first and into the abyss; he falls and he falls and he falls and just before he hits the ground, a glowing red takes hold of his body, and he –

“Fuck,” Chuuya groans and squeezes his eye shut as the coil starts to unravel in all directions. With a low groan, he fucks his cock deeper in increments, tiny, throbbing thrusts, until he’s completely buried inside Dazai and coming.

Feeling himself twitch with his release, he all but sags forward, dropping his forehead to Dazai’s chest as it rises and falls heavily. It finally gives Dazai permission to drop both his legs, trembling silently when they curl around Chuuya’s waist. Above him, Dazai’s fingers find Chuuya’s hair, gentle and needy at the same time.

A new type of warmth settles in the air; golden and shimmery and sweet with relief. Chuuya swims in it for a while. Judging by Dazai’s even-out breaths, he fairs no differently.

He wouldn’t describe himself as an idealist – he has seen too much to

believe in senseless utopias, but there is no other word in his vocabulary other than perfect – utterly, boundlessly perfect – when he tries to describe this brief moment in time.

Maybe all that suffering, all those lonely nights that Chuuya spent by himself, convinced that he was destined to be one of a kind for the rest of his life, all that agony, all those cliffs he had to jump over to get here – maybe they were worth it.

Don't get him wrong, he's not that angsty teen anymore that thinks the only way to get strong is through suffering. It's not. If he could have spared himself, or anyone, even a 1/100th of the pain, he would have. But maybe, just maybe, that is simply the ebb and flow of life. Sometimes it seems like the night is endless – sometimes it even convinces you that the darkness is all you will ever know – but at the end of it, the sun always rises again, and you get a chance to stand in its light once again, truly savoring it this time. Maybe it's okay – not always, and not forever, but right now, it's completely and utterly okay.

"Chuuya?"

Chuuya blinks himself out of his bubble bath-champagne-trance to meet Dazai's gaze on the other side of the bathtub. "Hm?"

"Do you think…" Dazai purses her lips and smacks them dramatically before continuing. "… you could ever live on a farm?"

"Huh? Where does that come from?"

"Just answer the question."

It's a relief to see Dazai slowly return to her typical bratty self. Chuuya dragged her out of bed, fed her, and then gently forced her into the tub an hour ago, her unusual mellow silence both startling and amusing. As more and more of the fog thaws off, Chuuya starts to think that he should have cherished pliant, little Dazai more than he did. But he will get the chance to do that in the future.

"Living on a farm," Chuuya echoes to win himself some time to think. Dazai spent a considerable part of her childhood there – but that is also where she spent those nine months. It's odd to ask such a question when for any reason Dazai should hold no positive association to such a place – to such a life. "I don't know. Sounds kind of boring to me."

Head tipped to the side, Dazai is silent, just watching Chuuya put his thoughts into words.

“Maybe someday.” He makes a face. “Someday way, way later. Like when I’m sixty.”

“Do you think you’ll get to be sixty being who you are?”

Chuuya’s insides twist. The question makes him defensive, searching for reasons why Dazai would disturb the peaceful night they’ve had so far, but in her expression, he only finds honest curiosity rather than provocation.

“Probably not,” Chuuya admits, and drops his head back with a sigh. “But outside of the job – yeah. Maybe.” No, actually, fuck that. “Yeah.”

“You’d give up being the boss?” Dazai raises his brow, his disbelief a little insulting. “You’d do that?”

Chuuya, for once, thinks about what to say and how to say it carefully before he answers, “I hope it’s something I will still be willing to do when that time comes.”

“Hm.” A long pause. “What do you mean by ‘when that time comes’?”

“Are you planning my retirement or something?”

“Humor me,” Dazai says, rolling his eyes. “Please.”

Chuuya smiles at the ceiling. He likes that word. *Please*. Especially when it comes from Dazai.

“You know why Mori took over your old man, right?” he asks, looking back at him. Dazai was already long gone by that time, but he must know.

“My old man went a little coo-coo,” Dazai answers flatly.

“Yeah, he stopped seeing reason. I think he knew that the job was outgrowing him and he couldn’t keep anymore, so he started treating everyone as a threat. Killing people left and right out of fucking paranoia.” Chuuya shakes his head. “I don’t want that. I want to leave on my own terms, and I don’t want my people to look back and remember me as that one deranged boss that refused to leave.”

Dazai studies his face and his words for a moment. Then: “That’s

noble, but it's also bullshit. Do you know how many people say the same thing before they step into power? All of them. And almost all of them can't give it up again once they get a taste of it."

"Well," Chuuya pins Dazai with a challenging stare, "good thing there is someone who will be able to make me see reason if it ever comes that far, no?"

Dazai's head jerks back, horrified. Their brows scrunch into a furious frown. "No! You'll hate me!"

Chuuya rolls his eye. "I'll get over it."

"I don't want to be the one to do it! Why don't you let Yosano be the one? Or Odasaku? Anyone, but me!"

"You and I both know, you're the best person for that job."

"That doesn't mean I want to do it!" Dazai mutters, folding their arms over their chest and scrunching up their nose. "I refuse. No. Non. *Nein."*

"Yes."

"Chuuya!!!"

"What?" Chuuya asks, half-laughing because Dazai's being ridiculous.

"Stop it!" To make their point, Dazai slams their fists down, splashing water everywhere. "You can't make me, so don't try! Find someone else!"

"Why are you being such a baby about this?"

"Why are you *not?* You're asking me to tell you to step away from your beloved organization – which you won't, and then I will have to make you – which you will resent me for! We will turn into one of those couples that despise each other but still go to bed together at the end of the day." Dazai shakes their head. "No!"

"You're acting like I'm a power-hungry dictator," Chuuya mutters, rolling his eye.

"Then let me ask you this: if I told you to step down now, would you?"

Chuuya's mouth opens –

And he falters.

Dazai gestures at him. “See?”

“It’s not the same.”

“It is.”

It’s not. Stepping down now would mean risking the possibility of the port mafia falling into unworthy hands. It, the city, Chuuya is not ready for that. Not yet. But someday –

“Do you honestly think that you will grow to love being boss less rather than more with time?” Dazai asks him.

Chuuya meets that sharp gaze despite the knot of discomfort tangled around his ribs. “I would like to think that I will love other things more than the port mafia.”

He has always prided himself on his rank in the organization: being the best, being the strongest, being the youngest – they do not replace the past that he does not remember but they constitute an identity that *he* shaped. With his own hands. Not some scientist in a lab. It was him.

But other than that, he has tried not to let the tempting heights that his ability could take him to not lift him too high. He saw what that did to people like Verlaine. Control is good and necessary, but it’s not everything, and it won’t sustain you in the long run.

So even if he will grow to love the position even more than he already has, Chuuya will try — and, gods, will he try — to stay rooted to the ground with both feet still. To hold onto those fragments of humanity that the last seventeen years of his life have given him.

“Other things?” Dazai questions.

Chuuya taps his index finger against the rim of the bathtub. “You.”

“You say that now, but what about three years from now? Five? Ten?”

“Dazai,” he says, leaning forward. “That’s what you’re supposed to prevent from happening. The moment you notice it might get bigger… you stop me.”

“But –” Dazai’s lip juts out. “You’ll hate me.”

A little amused, Chuuya raises his brows. “I mean, I may be pissy for a while but I’m also the one asking you for this right now. I’ll get over it.” And when Dazai remains unconvinced, he finds Dazai’s ankle in the water and squeezes lightly. “C’mon, we’ve managed to get this far. Do you honestly believe we won’t get through that, too?”

Except Dazai’s shoulders bend under an invisible weight. “Exactly. We got this far. I was kind of hoping that would be *it* – that we could just spend the rest of our lives having awesome sex and cuddling.”

Chuuya is too late to stifle the snort, which earns him an annoyed slap on his thigh.

“Why are you laughing?!”

“I’m sorry, okay? It’s just –” Chuuya struggles to find the right words. “Do you think that’s realistic? No, actually, scratch that. Do you think that’s something you *want?* Osamu, you’re chronically bored by routines, you thrive on being a little shit and a menace, and we’re not exactly the ‘happily ever after’ type of people.”

Dazai crosses their arms. “That doesn’t mean you have to make it worse by assigning me to be your punching bag in the near future.”

“You won’t be my punching bag.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Osamu, please,” Chuuya says, more serious this time because he is losing ways of convincing them here. “Do it for me?”

“And why would I do such a stupid thing for you?” Dazai shoots right back.

“Because you love me,” Chuuya answers matter-of-factly like it’s a natural law of life: the sun setting in the east or something. Only a moment later, does he notice his blunder.

Leave it to him to make Dazai say those words before she even says them himself. Not that they are the be-all-and-end-all of their relationship. They are just words. Anyone can say them. What matters is what you do to prove them: the small moves, the big moves, the daily gestures. Anyone can say “I love you” but not everyone can forgive you for exiling them, or give you the letters they wrote when they thought they would never see you again, or let you touch them like Dazai let Chuuya touch her.

Still, for some reason these words carry meaning, and he took them right out of Dazai's mouth.

He clears his throat. "I mean, you don't have to lo—"

"Oh, for christ's sake, I obviously do," Dazai snaps with a cute little growl. "I am asking myself why though. You're not making it easy with requests like that."

Chuuya huffs to himself, gaze lowering to the water in the tub, slowly starting to clear under the kingdom of scented bubbles. His thumb keeps rubbing Dazai's ankle. "I don't know who else to trust with this."

Though the truth is also that he wants it to be Dazai.

If there is anyone that will make Chuuya see reason, it will be her.

Not any of his subordinates, not Yosano, not friends – no, it will have to be Dazai.

Dazai who walked away from this life.

Dazai who once had the chance to sit at the top and waved it away like an irritating fly.

Dazai who could have used Chuuya to claw his way back to that throne, but didn't.

Dazai is a lot of things, but he isn't interested in the title of a mafia boss. That matters.

Slowly, ever so slowly, like the sun emerging from the east, he feels Dazai give in to the idea. A low exhale first. Then he leans into the touch of Chuuya's hands. Catches Chuuya's eye – and narrows his.

"What will I get in return?"

Chuuya blinks. "You want something?"

"Of course. Nothing ever comes without a price. You would know, right?"

"Right," he huffs, and lifts his brows. "What do you want?"

"Belinda."

“Huh?”

“God, Chuuya. Did you even read the letters I gave you?”

“Obviously!” That being said, Chuuya still has to dig around in his head to connect that name to a person – or, rather, an animal. “Belinda as in *your cow?”*

Dazai nods.

“Osamu,” he says. “How do you expect me to give you a damn cow? We live in the middle of the city.”

“You’re asking me for something possible, so I’m returning the favor. How you decide to make it possible is not my problem.”

Chuuya wants to argue but the tight-lipped expression on Dazai’s face already says that the decision has been made. Either Chuuya finds a solution, or he accepts that neither of them gets what they want – but that is not acceptable. He will fly a thousand cows over if that is what it takes.

“Fine,” he says. “You get Belinda, and I get your promise to pull me out when it’s time.”

“Deal,” Dazai says, staring back at him without flinching.

Chuuya raises his brow then, making Dazai squint a little. “What?”

“C’mere.”

“Why?”

“We have to seal the deal, sweetheart.”

Although Dazai still looks skeptical, they lean closer to meet Chuuya in the middle of the tub anyway. “And how do you suggest we do that? Spit on our hands? Cut our wrists and bind us by blood?”

Chuuya’s cheeks ache with the force of his grin. “How about a kiss?”

“Hm… let me think about it.”

“Don’t take too long.”

Dazai pretends to consider that too, but only for a moment. Then he exhales and lets Chuuya cup his chin to guide him to his mouth. They

kiss, slow and steady before the simmering heat grows a little wilder, lips parting, breaths catching, and water splashing around them as skin presses against skin.

They kiss, and the deal is made.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: explicit sexual content, gender identity discussions & use of they/them + she/her pronouns for Dazai <3

This chapter concludes the main story of this fic, so thank you and congratulations for ALMOST reaching the end!!! We only have the epilogue left to go :"))))) <3 I feel like I've been working on this story for ages so getting to the end is both relieving and a little daunting but hey, all good things must come to an end, right? Well, we're nearly there!

Chapter 28: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something big, warm, and squishy is pressing against him.

That's the first thought that crosses Chuuya's mind when he floats back to consciousness and out of the land of dreams.

Something big, warm, squishy and –

Something that makes his neck tickle, enough to pry his eyes open and attempt to squirm away from the sensation. But that something sees that as its invitation to nestle even closer.

Chuuya groans and tangles his fingers in Dazai's hair to drag him away from his neck—or try to anyway. "Tickles," he complains in a thick, sleep-drugged voice. "Stop it."

Dazai only hums. "No."

"Osamu…"

"'s not my fault your neck is the most comfortable place to rest against." Finally, Chuuya manages to pull him back enough to look at him, face twisting into a whiny pout as his eyes blink open. "You are so mean to your husband. I should file for divorce."

All that Chuuya sees though is the content and relaxed easiness that lies underneath. His fingers soften to just brush through his tousled curls, mouth curving into a smile. "Hi."

"Hi," Dazai mumbles back and yawns into his face. Bastard. "Good morning."

"Morning."

They lie there for a few moments, basking in the buttery morning sunshine that peeks through the windows like a bashful guest that hasn't worked up the courage to come in yet. Chuuya traces all the moles and beauty marks he can find on Dazai's skin to fight the slumbering beast inside him that wants to pull up the sheets and steal another few hours of sleep. But judging by the muffled noises coming

from outside, it's already late and they've got shit to do. No time to laze around all morning.

… but there is always enough time to do this. Stroke Dazai's cheek, admire how pretty they look, and do nothing but be here for a few minutes. Even when there isn't, Chuuya makes sure to make time for it.

Time.

Such a precious thing to have.

"My dreams were weird again," Dazai eventually murmurs, breaking the spell of peaceful silence between them. He makes a face like he is remembering something unpleasant.

He probably is.

Chuuya lets go of him to stretch his arms above his head with a belly-deep sigh before sitting up. "About…?"

"What else? It's always about that."

Humming, he pats Dazai's cheek in sympathy. The specific incident they're talking about almost happened… what, nine, eight years ago? Point being: it was a long time ago – and still, it affects Dazai up to this day. It could have been worse though. Much worse.

"But there was a dragon. That was fun."

"Dragons, huh? Must have been hell of a dream."

"Hell of a life," Dazai says with a scoff.

"Did I get to pet the dragon? Or better yet, ride it?" He turns to Dazai with a frown then. "Have you been reading *a Song of Ice and Fire* without me again?"

Dazai shakes his head and lets out a muffled groan against the pillow. "No, Chuuya. I'm not a traitorous whore."

"I never know with you."

"Rude."

"Well, what am I supposed to think?" Chuuya huffs as he slips out of bed and bends down to stretch out his legs. "You're talking here about

dragons and shit."

"It's not my fault that my brain is all scrambled and confused after…" he trails off.

"I know, baby," Chuuya tells him from the floor.

He hears Dazai sigh. "Let's talk about something else." A moment later, the bed squeaks, followed by the sound of feet hitting the floor. "I really have to pee."

Chuuya manages to lift his upper body back up in time to give Dazai's butt a smack and draw an outraged squeak out of him. By the time, he is done with his stretches, the door of the bedroom swings open again, and Dazai strolls back inside with a cat in his arms, her white fur shaggy and grimy even though Chuuya spent three hours cleaning up all the creatures here days ago. She makes low, threatening whining sounds as Dazai squeezes her to his chest and blissfully ignores her protests.

Meet Amarantha. Royal bitch. She keeps all the other cats around here in check.

"Aww, someone's grumpy today," Chuuya says when Dazai brings her closer so he can drop a kiss on her head — more howling — and scratch her muzzle. "Didn't get enough sleep, huh? I feel you, baby. I do. But that's life. No rest for the wicked, yeah?"

"She's crabby because *someone* hasn't fed her yet," Dazai pipes in ever so helpfully. "Isn't that so, Amarantha?" Lifting her to his eye level, he tilts his head this way and that. "It's all Chuuya's fault, right?"

"*Chuuya* wouldn't be so late feeding the monsters if the other lazy bastard would bother to lift their butt and contribute to this household every once in a while."

"Now why in the world would I do that?" Dazai continues in a cooing voice, raising Amarantha like she is Simba in that one scene from *the Lion King*. "I have my own things to do!"

Finally having enough, the cat wiggles out of Dazai's arms. Because Dazai's face has felt the wrath of her sharp claws one too many times, he lets her go and directs his brilliant grin at Chuuya instead. "Kids, huh?"

Chuuya just exhales a puff of breath before shuffling into the

bathroom. “How do you feel about eggs?” he shouts as he squeezes toothpaste on his toothbrush — something that takes him two minutes because it’s pretty much empty. They should probably pay a visit downtown soon.

“I feel like they could talk more every once in a while,” Dazai answers, joining his side. “Like I am the only one who ever says something when we hang out.”

“Ha ha. You’re so funny.”

Dazai clutches her chest and bats her eyes. “You think so?”

“I feel like eggs today,” Chuuya muses to himself while brushing his teeth. “Like devouring a nice, big pair of eggs. That will make me very happy.”

“And here I thought that was my job.”

Chuuya shoots him a flat look in the mirror reflection. Dazai responds with a cheerful grin.

“I feel like bread with jam today,” she informs Chuuya after spitting out water and toothpaste.

Chuuya hums. “That’s good too.”

“And strawberry tea.”

“Neat.” And because he knows Dazai too well at this point, he curls a hand in the sleeve of her sweater before she can make an escape. “Not so fast, Osamu.”

Dazai makes a disgruntled sound in the back of her throat but obediently sits down at the edge of the tub and juts out her face for him, so Chuuya can start rubbing various skincare products into her skin. “This is excessive,” she makes sure to grumble anyway. “Chuuya is excessive. No one needs this.”

“You need this.”

“I don’t. I’d be pretty without it as well.”

“I’m not saying you wouldn’t be, but you’re thirty-one and still look like you’re fresh out of college,” Chuuya points out and pokes his forehead when he is done applying the sunscreen. “You’ve got me to thank for that.”

“What’s so wrong with looking your age, huh?”

Chuuya just looks at him. Dazai rolls his eyes and sighs dramatically before getting up. “Are we done yet? I’m hungry. I’m *starving.”* His arms snake around Chuuya, pulling him back against his chest as his mouth finds Chuuya’s neck. “I might need to snack on something else to survive while we wait for our food.”

“And face the wrath of a dozen cats?” Chuuya murmurs, eyes fluttering half-closed, arching his neck to give Dazai more room to work with.

“The only cat you should be worried about is this one right here.” To make a point, Dazai nips at his skin until Chuuya lets out a slow breath from the delicious sting. “And this one is hungry. So hungry, Chuuya…”

Chuuya almost lets the hazy morning lust overcome him and start the day with a quick — or maybe a long, indulgent fuck. Almost. Because when he rolls his hips back into Dazai, feeling him twitch, a loud banging comes from downstairs.

They both sigh in unison.

“If we ignore them, they’ll go away,” Dazai murmurs, meeting his gaze in the mirror.

Chuuya’s mouth quirks into a smile, but he pats his husband’s arm and slips out of the delicious bubble of warmth all around him. “Remember what happened the last time we did that?”

“Eh… someone almost died, sure, but the sex was really good. Worth it.”

“It was,” Chuuya commiserates, leaving the bathroom to stroll down the stairs because whoever is at the door isn’t much of a patient guest. “But we’re not doing that today.”

The person responsible for all that noise is Kenji Miyazawa, the son of the family who founded the animal rescue farm and who has taken over the business after his mother fell ill last year. His eyes are wide and his cheeks pale when Chuuya opens the door.

“Belinda Junior is in labor!”

“Oh,” Chuuya says. And then: “*Oh.* DAZAI!”

“Whaaaaat now?” comes the whiny reply from the stairs.

“Cow birth!” he shouts, already slipping into a pair of boots and grabbing his cord jacket. There is no time for pants, so he will just have to own the fact that he’s only wearing a pair of boxer briefs. Not like half of the village hasn’t already seen him like this a dozen times anyway.

Dazai must have bothered to put on a pair of sweatpants before because he appears by his side dressed and ready to go. Bastard. Chuuya bets he already knew this was going to happen today, but didn’t bother giving Chuuya a heads-up.

Kenji leads them to the barn where it’s happening, the town’s vet and another farm worker, Emily, are already there. It’s all a little hectic and fast and he's not going to lie, *gross*. Even though Dazai spent the last three weeks telling everyone that he had to be here to witness this moment, he nearly throws up three times, clutching Chuuya’s arm like a lifeline as he gags into his hand.

But it’s also beautiful.

Because after an hour, there is a gangly, wet calf staggering to its feet.

It’s life. It’s birth. It’s magic.

And when Chuuya glances to his side, Dazai is sniffing audibly and wiping the corner of their eye with their sleeve.

Chuuya can only smile to himself.

They have become soft.

There was a time when Chuuya was convinced that life as a mafia member was all that he would ever know. That he would die a mafia member the same way he spent his entire life living as one. That the silly dream he once used to have — of a mundane, boring life with breakfasts and dinners with someone he loves, spending lunch breaks somewhere out in nature with a glass of soda and a hearty meal, dancing through the kitchen, seeing the world without the shadow of death following him, coming home to a warm pair of loving arms and an ear to listen to all his silly, little problems… of a life standing in the sun — would only ever remain that: a dream.

And yet, here he is.

Strolling past acres of land, past animals who have found a place to rest here, past cabins holding other strays, past something good that he helped *build* for once, and listening to Dazai go on and on about how equally fascinating and terrifying it was to watch a baby calf get born into this terrible, beautiful world. Entering *their* home. Their kitchen. And cooking breakfast together with a day ahead of him that is packed with work, duties, and tasks, but a day that he will get to spend in the sun. Literally and figuratively.

“Belinda would have been happy about becoming a granny,” Dazai eventually says and finishes their long-winded rant, licking their fingers clean off strawberry jam. Their smile wobbles a little. “Pity that she had to miss this.”

Chuuya never got to meet Belinda. By the time he first went back to the farm with Dazai, that beloved cow of his had passed away already. But she left Dazai a daughter, and now her daughter has given Dazai another cow to care for.

To be honest, Chuuya prefers to spend time with all the cats and dogs that reside here. Dazai is a little different that way. But hey, that’s what makes them good. Polar opposites attract and all. They managed to spend the last ten years together, no matter how many fights there were, how many betrayals, obstacles and outlandish challenges, so there must be something to it.

He offers Dazai a small, encouraging smile. “Yeah. Pity.”

Even though it is tempting to linger on all that they have lost, they both know that time is too precious to waste too much on remembering. Dazai sucks in a breath, exhales a deep, long sigh before opening his eyes to return Chuuya’s grin with an even bigger one. He makes it look pretty damn good. “Do you think you’ll be done with Daisuke by three o’clock?”

“Probably,” Chuuya mumbles, gobbling down the last piece of his omelet. “Why?” His brows raise in suspicion. “What are you planning?”

Dazai makes his eyes go all wide and round, folding his hands together in front of his chest. “Me? Nothing.” Which means that he absolutely is planning something.

“Uh-uh,” Chuuya hums with a wry nod; they both know that he knows.

“Anyway, it’s time to get these talented hands to work now,” Dazai announces, getting up from the table to dump his dishes in the sink. “The words won’t write themselves.”

“Which chapter are you tackling today?”

“Chapter twenty-four.” Though the way Dazai says it, with a whine laced into his tone, it sounds like chapter one. “And if I don’t get through that stupid wall in my brain, I’ll skip to the end and write the epilogue.”

“Talking to Oda didn’t help?”

Dazai releases a shrill whine. “I thought it did, but I sat down yesterday, ready to get it all out and… and didn’t! The only thing I got out was a measly paragraph that I'll probably delete anyway. It's so terrible. Every single word is straight-up *garbage*.” A moment later, a cold, sniffling nose presses against Chuuya’s neck. “I think my brain is rotting from the inside out, Chuuya.”

“Poor baby,” Chuuya mutters, absently patting his cheek.

Dazai nods a few times, apparently keen on milking as much attention as possible today.

“I’m sure you’ll get a breakthrough today. And if not, then take a break. Work on something else for a while. God knows how many other stories you’ve got stored in that head of yours.”

“Hmph.” Dazai hides in his neck for another few moments before drawing away. “Now that you mention it, I have been wanting to make time for that short story I told you about for a while now.” He makes a small, happy sound and claps his hands together. “You’re brilliant, Chuuya. Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!”

A surprised squeak slips out of Chuuya when Dazai plants three loud, wet kisses on his cheek. “You’re welcome?”

“Kunikida is going to kill me, but it will be worth it!” He disappears around the corner but pops his head back into the kitchen not even three seconds later. “By the way, three o’clock here stands, yes?” He answers himself without waiting for a response. “Yes! Wonderful. See you then!”

And there he goes again.

Eyes falling toward the clock on the wall, Chuuya grimaces. If he plans to make it in time for Dazai's not-surprise, then he will have to hurry now since the calf birth this morning pushed his schedule an hour back.

But that's okay.

A hectic midmorning is worth it when the person waiting for him at the end of it is Dazai.

"Are you ready?"

Chuuya scans Dazai, wearing their usual denim overall with a white shirt underneath – no bandages except for a tiny, pink band-aid around their fingers from a cooking accident that was more of a demonstration of why Dazai should not be cooking than an accident. Their hand is curled around a basket.

"Do I need to bring anything?" he asks, grabbing his keys.

"Just yourself. That's all I need."

Chuuya hums. "Then I'm ready."

He follows Dazai as they lead them out of the backdoor through their backyard and onto the hiking trail that Chuuya jogs down a few times a week — sometimes he even manages to drag Dazai along. On those days it always takes him twice the amount of time to run the distance, but it's also twice as fun. *The universe taketh and giveth,* as Dazai likes to say.

Today they are not running though.

"— and it actually worked. I spat out, like, the entire short story in just one afternoon! In one! And I got an idea for chapter twenty-four while I was writing it, so now I'm vibrating with ideas. I bet I will finish the chapter when I sit down to write it after this." Dazai has to pause to catch his breath several times and Chuuya can't help but smile, finding Dazai's poor stamina still kind of charming.

"Told you, you could do it."

"Hmm, Chuuya does tend to be right when it comes to my brilliance," Dazai agrees shamelessly. "How was your day?"

Chuuya shrugs. "Fine. The old man asked me when I'm planning to

get myself a wife like ten times even though I showed him the damn ring around my finger ten times as well." He shoots the shiny, sleek ring around his finger a glare.

As much as he loves spending his days here, not everything is perfect. Old people from the countryside are… well, old people from the countryside. Half the town thinks they are either siblings — which is ridiculous because they look nothing alike, and certainly don't act like it either — or best friends. Best friends, who apparently live together, make out behind barns and cottages, have sex, and –

Oh yeah, who are *married.* On paper and all.

And sometimes when Dazai ventures outside in a skirt or a dress, people think that he is someone else completely, asking Chuuya whether he finally found a damn girlfriend. He did. Ten damn years ago.

They have both learned to take it like a big, silly joke though.

"But I *am* your wife."

"So I keep telling him."

Dazai makes a tiny sound in his throat. "I'll just come along next time. I look like a good wife, right?" She tilts his chin this way and that, giving Chuuya a show of that gorgeous face. "Not just husband material?"

"Not just husband material," Chuuya agrees and gives her ass a smack. Dazai's relationship with her identity, as well as herself, had its of ups and downs over the past decade. A few years ago, she declared that nonbinary was the term that came closest to describing how she felt and that she was tired of thinking about it and that was that. Moving here took some adjusting all over again. "You are the best wife I could have ever asked for."

"Hm, you're not so bad of a husband yourself."

"Not so bad?" Chuuya asks with a huff that is half-amused and half-affronted.

Dazai's hum of confirmation is like a verbal nudge in the ribs. "Not so bad."

"How generous of you."

“I know,” Dazai chirps. “That’s why I’m the best wife.”

Chuuya’s initial guess was that Dazai is taking him out for a picnic. She has done it in the past and even though it’s never much of a surprise, they both still like to act that way. Life is much more exciting if you treat everything – from good morning kisses to hikes through the woods – like birthday gifts. But now Chuuya is not so sure anymore. They passed all their usual spots five minutes ago, yet Dazai continues shepherding them higher and higher up the hill.

“Okay, we’re almost there,” Dazai finally says after another five minutes, promptly sidling up behind Chuuya and snaking her arms around him. “I will need to cover your eyes now.”

“Need to?” Chuuya repeats with a laugh. “It’s not my birthday or anything, right?”

“No, sweetheart. That was three months ago.”

The low voice in his ear sets his heart aflame – and even though Dazai’s hands let muffled darkness descend over Chuuya’s world, his vision still fills with red. Red like the blood pumping through his veins because years ago this man, his husband, refused to let him die. Red like the wine that they share on the porch after dinner. Red like Dazai’s eyes when the sun begins to bleed all over the sky and the shades of brown begin to bleed too.

“Right,” Chuuya says, his impatience softening.

Dazai cautiously directs him forward for a few more steps and it’s then that his nose catches a whiff of a familiar note.

Floral and expensive. Rich. Intimate.

“Osamu…”

“Just a few more seconds, love.” He hears Dazai smile. “Patience.”

“Fine,” Chuuya replies. “For you.”

Dazai has been and will always be the only exception to every rule in his books. He demanded to enter the gilded cage that Chuuya had been living in when he was twenty-one and too bruised to realize that there was more to life than the Port Mafia. He demanded to stay. He demanded to fix what Chuuya had broken. And then, at the peak of their reign in the black tower, he demanded they leave.

Every single time Chuuya bent, and he doesn't regret a single one of those choices.

So if Dazai asks him to be patient now, patient he will be.

"Okay, we're here," Dazai at long last announces, his fingers around Chuuya's eyes warm and jittery with excitement. "You ready?"

"I was born ready."

The hands come off. Chuuya's vision returns and it fills with the sight of three people. Three friends.

"Surprise, buttercup," Yosano Akiko exclaims loudly; her cheer is accompanied by the sudden pop and hiss of the champagne in her hands. Donning her usual coat, skirt, and high heels, she sticks out like a sore thumb amidst all the foliage and nature. So does Dostoevsky, close behind her, his smirk less wide but just as warm. The only one who looks like he belongs is Oda, already armed with faded jeans and a plaid button-up.

Chuuya chokes out a puzzled laugh, gaze sliding between the three and Dazai. "Okay, what is going on here?"

Don't get him wrong, he is happy to see his friends. Delighted, even. It has been more than three months since their last visit and Chuuya has missed them like crazy, not used to spending so much time away from them. But they also talk regularly. Parading around as a big surprise is a bit dramatic if you ask him.

"Is this a way to greet your friends?" Yosano asks with a huff, already stalking forward to envelop Chuuya in a firm hug.

"I mean, hey, hello, Akiko," Chuuya murmurs, hugging her back just as fiercely. "I'm obviously delighted to see you."

As soon as she steps away to give the same treatment to Dazai, Oda is already wrapping his arms around him, his embrace so tight and genuine that he lifts Chuuya off the ground for a few embarrassing seconds.

"You too man," he says, catching his breath before his eyes fall on the last of the three. Dostoevsky. "And even you."

The Russian mafia boss smirks back at him like they are in on a dirty inside joke – then he gives Chuuya exactly three cheek kisses.

Apparently, that's how Russian relatives and close friends greet each other.

"But what are you doing here?" Chuuya asks, confusion still a bright, needy flame inside him. "I thought you weren't supposed to come until… September?"

He feels Dazai settle next to him and they share a brief look – one that tells Chuuya as much as 'I know what's going on but I'm not going to tell you because I'm a menace.'

"Yeah, but," Yosano shrugs innocently, "I had to be here for myself to make sure everything will go perfectly."

Chuuya's eyes narrow. "What will?"

And then he sees them: the wooden stakes in the ground, red ribbons fluttering in the wind. Boundary stakes. Marking someone's property.

"The kids need a break from the city every now and then," Oda casually says, referring to the rowdy bunch of orphans that they have adopted. Kousuke, Katsumi, You, Shinji, and Sakura. Their parents were in the Port Mafia; died during a particularly brutal conflict six years ago. They are loud and annoying and Chuuya loves them.

"And, frankly, so do we," Yosano adds, her grin growing wider with each second that passes.

"So we decided to buy the land and build a house," Dostoevsky finishes.

Chuuya's chest rumbles but the laugh that bursts out is as breathless as the wisp of smoke. "A house, huh?"

"A big house," Dazai says, sliding their arms around him from behind. Their mouth lowers to Chuuya's ear. "Big enough that we'll be able to hide from the kids."

"For all of us?"

It seems ridiculous considering Chuuya and Dazai already have somewhere to live.

But these are their friends. Their people.

It may sound odd but it feels *right*.

Yosano plants her hands on her hips. “Just like in the good old days, remember? He five of us living together?”

“The four of us,” Chuuya corrects. “Dostoevsky wasn’t part of that picture.”

“But we had some good times too, no?”

Chuuya scoffs softly. His mind buzzes.

Dazai’s possessive streak shines through as they tighten their clutch around him. “Not as fun as the four of us.”

“In any case, now we’ll get to try it out altogether.” Yosano rolls her eyes when she turns to the two of them. “Don’t look so aghast, babe. It’s just for the holidays.” But the underlying fondness in her voice is impossible to miss.

Neither is the smile that Chuuya doesn’t hold back.

“I wouldn’t even mind if you stayed the whole year. You know you’re always welcome here.”

There are more words, more gentle jabs, and more plans – big plans, grown tall over the course of the years that span between the five of them ever since they were sowed at the very beginning. Somehow, Yosano manages to steal Chuuya away from all the ruckus and pull him aside to catch up.

“How’s Karma doing?” Chuuya asks as they sit down on a blanket. He usually steers away from sensitive questions like this – not only for himself but because the danger that someone could be listening remains. Better to have these conversations in private, like here, in the countryside, on a hill overlooking trees and meadows and life.

“It’s been touch and go for the first few months but it’s better now. He’s good. You taught him well.” Yosano slides her gaze to him. “Do you miss it?”

Chuuya lifts his head to the sky above; his eyelids fall shut as warm rays of light touch his face, so kind and patient. “Not more than I like it here.”

“So you and Dazai are good too? You haven’t tried to kill each other lately?”

That startles a laugh out of him. “We almost ruined our living room a couple of weeks ago,” he admits with a casual shrug, “but yeah, we’re good.”

“What was it about this time?”

“Silly things.” He makes a face. “I think we’re both too used to drama and violence, so sometimes we create fights just for the sake of adrenaline, y’know?”

“And the good make-up sex,” Yosano adds, bumping her shoulder against his.

Chuuya snorts. “And that, yeah.”

A pause then.

“Isn’t staying here making it worse then?”

For a while, that’s what Chuuya feared too. He could accept leaving the Port Mafia. It was his own request, after all – even if he had uttered it years and years ago, still so young, so naïve. Deep down in his veins, he knew it was the right thing to do though. But coming here, a rural village hosting about a couple of hundred people, at best, holed up in a house with Dazai, and nothing but time to tear each other apart from boredom and mafia withdrawals?

The first months were rough, that’s for sure. They fought. A lot. Blowing tiny hicks in their day-to-day life out of proportion until they were screaming obscenities at each other over virtually nothing. Dazai never missed a chance to remind Chuuya of the day he had asked Dazai to stop him. And Chuuya always responded with the fact that he never asked Dazai to *make him into a fucking farmer with nothing to do.* The countryside – it is a place of light. *Too much* light for people like them, illuminating parts of them that are better off buried.

But the problem wasn’t that they were fighting but that they were fighting *with each other.* They were both junkies craving blood, something to sink their teeth into. Working together in the Port Mafia, Chuuya as the boss and Dazai as his right hand and his partner, they weren’t at each other’s throats – at least, not all the time – because they were busy annihilating their enemies.

Here, they only had themselves to destroy.

That epiphany changed everything though. What they needed was an

outlet. Something to unite them and to be a conduit for their cravings. They tried many things: bedroom roleplays (they still fall back on those but most of the time, it's not quite enough), joining game nights to compete against other couples – and *win*, locating the previous owners of the abused animals that end up in the Kenji animal sanctuary and showing them how not fun it is to be treated like shit. Lately, they have been scouring the news for murders and kidnappings in the area and playing vigilante detectives. Things like that.

It works. Besides –

"It's not like we have to stay here forever."

Yosano raises her brows, a silent command to elaborate.

"Just until the underworld settles down, and then…" Chuuya trails off with a shrug.

"Then what?"

"Then we can do whatever the hell we want. That's just it."

They are free.

No family, no bosses, and no scientists are dictating their lives anymore.

Whatever decision they make in the future will be fully and entirely *theirs*.

Sometime later, a pair of arms wrap around Chuuya's waist from behind.

"Did you like your surprise?" he hears Dazai whisper into his ear.

"Very," Chuuya says and gives the hands resting on his abs a squeeze before casting Dazai a glance over his shoulder. "How long have you assholes been planning this?"

"A while now. I know you miss your friends," Dazai murmurs, eyes softening. "I miss them too."

It's funny how things turn out.

After they found the book, the two of them, Chuuya and Dazai, said they would tolerate Dostoevsky's presence for two reasons and two reasons only: business and to keep an eye on him.

And they did.

But time rushed by, and Dostoevsky never stepped out of the line that they had drawn between them. He conducted his business in Moscow, spent his days in Yokohama with Yosano and Oda, and occasionally paid the Port Mafia a visit when he had a work-related reason to do so.

They never called an official truce; neither did they cross each other's inner circles in their respective organizations, but outside of that…

Bit by bit, they grew into friends. All of them.

And for people like them – raised to be weapons and symbols and leaders instead of humans, raised not to trust anyone, raised to ruin – finding friends and someone to share their lives with is worth more than any of the riches that their organizations offer.

"Thank you," Chuuya says, holding Dazai's gaze. "For everything."

For staying when it would have been easier to leave. For showing him that not everything that he loves has to die eventually. For *this*.

Dazai exhales a soft puff and nuzzles his neck. Their nose is fucking freezing but every single part where their bodies press together is warm. "Not everyone gets as many chances as we did, so…" They shrug. "It's only smart to actually make something of it."

They are right; not everyone had this many chances to get it right.

Chuuya's gaze travels skyward. As he blinks, ghosts of the past flicker in front of his eyes.

The sheep. His first family. The kids who picked him off the streets and gave him a name, an identity, a role in their band of misfits. They made him human, so when Shirase rammed that poisoned blade into his back, it wasn't only the betrayal that hurt but the underlying message that came with it: *if you have no use to us anymore, then you have no use at all*. And what did that make him? Certainly not human. Just another pawn in someone else's game...

But the sheep were just kids. *They* were pawns too, and the man that was playing them against Chuuya was Mori Ougai.

Then there were the Flags. The rowdy bunch that took Chuuya in no matter how many times he rejected them. The people who, for the

very first time in his life, looked at Chuuya and asked: *What do* you *need? How can we help?* And they ended up paying with their lives for it.

Their deaths were a sign that Chuuya was destined to spend his life alone. Not necessarily miserable. Life as a Port Mafia executive under Mori's reign was okay. Tolerable. Sometimes even good. But it was a lonely life, and it was never *free*.

He even sees Rimbaud and Verlaine. So tormented by their mistakes that they wasted their lives away with meaningless quests instead of finding solace in each other. He sees the parents that he never had and that he declined to meet. Doctors. Good people, on paper. People who may or may not think about him from time to time as well.

No matter where he went, Chuuya always, in one way or another, looked for a family. For people to give his love and his loyalty to. For someone to fucking stay. And even though it took a while – a painfully long while – to make peace with himself and the ghosts in his heart, he did, and now…

Chuuya glances to the side. Yosano's drinking wine, laughing quietly with Oda on her left and Dostoevsky on her right. He glances over his shoulder where Dazai yawns, squinting adorably to keep his eyes open.

Now his heart swells in his chest because it is no longer occupied by ghosts but by the people here with him.

He found what he was looking for, and now that he has it –

He is going to fight like hell to hold onto it.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

> WE ARE HERE!!! WE GOT TO THE END!!! And it only took like several years lol. I had no idea that today would be the day that I would FINALLY FINALLYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY sit down and edit this damn epilogue but something struck me this afternoon and I just did it. I'm proud of myself. I hope you guys are proud of me too. Thank you to everyone who has waited so patiently, left me comments, sent me CCs, drew art for this, gave me feedback and motivation and inspiration!!!! I love writing but you guys make it 1000x more fun, so thank you! It's been a RIDE

:'''''''')

And to anyone who might be interested in seeing Even more of TK... they may or may not make an appearance in my other fic A Lesson in Thorns..... maybe.

End Notes

I'm @arkastadt on twitter if you ever wanna yell at me. You can yell at me in the comment section too, of course ;-;

Works inspired by this one

Between friends, a daisy is kept. by orphan_account

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